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THE HOUSEHOLD OF PETER

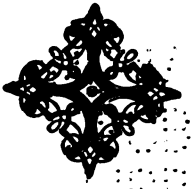


The Household of Peter

A NOVEL

By ROSA NOUCHETTE CAREY

Author of "The Mistress of Brae Farm," "The Highway of Fate," "A Passage Perilous," etc.



A. L. BURT COMPANY

PUBLISHERS NEW YORK



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Published September, 1905

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THE HOUSEHOLD OF PETER

Chapter I

THE RED HOUSE

Nothing happens to any man which he is not formed by nature to bear.—M. AURELIUS ANTONINUS.

I shall remember:
When Cæsar says "do this," it is perform'd.
SHAKESPEARE.

AFTER all there was no discussion!

The Council of Three had assembled with due decorum and ceremony; but before the proceedings had well commenced, and the chairwoman had taken her place, the meeting had been dissolved by the usual formula:

"There is no use talking about it, Vera, until we know Peter's opinion."

Of course it was Ranee who clinched the matter in this abrupt fashion; it was Ranee who was generally the spokeswoman, the moving spirit in the family conclave, and her remark seemed to excite no surprise in her hearers' minds; it was evidently a foregone conclusion: discussion was dear to the feminine mind, but Peter's opinion was the real point of the argument.

"I daresay he knows all about it," went on Ranee briskly; "it is just waste of time and breath arguing about it until we know what he wishes us to do. You may be right, Vera, and people may be surprised if we take notice of Miss Burke, but if Peter asks us to call on her we shall just have to do it."

"But he has not asked us yet, Ranee," objected her sister, "and I am not at all sure that he will do so; and perhaps if we were to drop a hint, or throw a little cold water, when first he starts the idea, he may be induced to think with us. Peter is only a young man, and in matters of etiquette women are often the best judges."

Vera spoke with such unusual decision and dignity that Sallie, who had hitherto remained silent, looked up rather apprehensively from her drawing,—only at that moment Ranee tapped the table playfully and called them to order.

"Vera may be right, as I said before, but I refuse to say another word until Peter comes in. It is only an hour before luncheon, and I mean to sit down to my lace-work; so, ladies, we will consider the case of Hannah Burke shelved for the present."

Ranee's mode of disposing of a vexed question was more than a trifle abrupt, and Vera, who would have preferred to talk over the matter comfortably, looked somewhat disappointed; but she was yielding and gentle by nature, and generally followed her sister's lead. Ranee was impetuous, but she was wonderfully clever and quick-witted, and undoubtedly she was right in one matter: whatever their own private opinion might be, at the Red House Peter's word was law. In their simple creed the family pope was infallible, and might issue a new bull if he pleased every day of his life.

It was rather a pretty scene—if there had been any spectator to admire it. The spring sunshine that lighted up the long, low drawing-room at the Red House touched the three girlish heads gathered round the side-table, which was always littered with work of every description, and beside which was Sallie's easel and Ranee's lace pillow and formidable array of bobbins.

People often said that Dr. Holt was absurdly proud of his sisters, and never thought that other girls could be compared with them, but he had some ground for his partiality. Vera, the eldest, was certainly a pretty girl —indeed she might almost have been called beautiful, her features were so regular and her complexion so brilliant; her figure, too, was slender and graceful, and she had an air of dignity that held undesirable admirers at a distance.

"Miss Holt is confoundedly handsome, only she keeps a fellow so at arm's length," growled one malcontent. "An iceberg may be good to look at, but it must be a bit chilling if one were to come close to it, and I prefer something more human for daily life." But Arthur Nesbitt was wrong, Vera Holt was no iceberg.

In comparison with her sister, Ranee was comparatively plain, but in reality she was a nice-looking girl. Though she had no claim to beauty, she had her good points. If her features were not classic like Vera's, she had more expression and animation. She had a small, beautifully shaped head, set off by thick coils of dark brown hair. She was not as tall as her sister, but, on the other hand, she was not short, and her figure was good.

It was Sallie who was the least attractive of the sisters, though she too was by no means plain. She had a grave,

rather solemn little face, and shy, quiet ways, that often caused her to be ignored by strangers; but when she was at her ease, with those congenial to her, Sallie's brown eyes would brighten and fill with light, and the colour would come to her face, and she would look almost pretty. Vera and Ranee always maintained stoutly that she was pretty, but then they were not impartial judges, for Sallie was the family pet, the spoilt darling of the house.

The mothers of marriageable daughters in Abbey-Thorpe and its environs had been heard to pity Dr. Holt for being saddled with three sisters,—a clever young man just rising in his profession, and only beginning his career, must be heavily handicapped by a such a weight of responsibility,—and more than one severe critic had remarked, *sotto voce,* that in their opinion the Holt girls should do something to lighten the daily burden. One sister would be enough to manage the house, and so on; for Abbey-Thorpe, like other small country towns, had plenty of well-meaning persons anxious to settle other folks' business for them; and since Anthony Holt's death the household at the Red House had occupied a good deal of public attention.

Anthony Holt had lived all his life in the high narrow house in St. Andrew's Street. There he had brought his young wife, and there his children had been born. Mr. Holt had been a solicitor, and had his office in Market Street, where he carried on his business; he had been much respected in Abbey-Thorpe, and but for some investments, which turned out badly, he would have left his family fairly comfortable. As it was, the modest sum of fifteen hundred pounds each was the sole inheritance of Peter and his sisters, added to which Peter became

the owner of the family house. There could be little doubt that the loss of his hardly earned money preyed on Mr. Holt's mind to the serious detriment of his health, following as it did so closely on the death of his wife and of his second son Willoughby.

Willoughby, who had only just finished his university career and was about to enter his father's office, had succumbed to a sudden attack of illness, the result of a chill, and the shock had been too much for the mother, who was at that time in a weak condition. Those were dark days at the Red House, and Peter Holt, who was just beginning practice, found himself the sole protector, the friend, philosopher, and guide of three doating sisters. Under such circumstances it could hardly be a matter of surprise if the master of the Red House should become somewhat of an autocrat; but the two years that had elapsed since their father's death had familiarised them with the situation, and to all outward seeming the household at the Red House was a singularly harmonious one.

Abbey-Thorpe was somewhat prolific of doctors, and Dr. Holt had to encounter opposition, and to make his way slowly in spite of many difficulties; he was clever and enterprising, and loved his profession dearly, but the easy-going, old fashioned practitioners who drove up and down St. Andrew's Street in their softly padded carriages looked askance at the tall, broad-shouldered young man who walked so quickly, with his chin a little raised and carrying his head high, as though he knew he had the world to conquer, and would shrug their shoulders a little disparagingly at Peter's warm enthusiasms and advanced theories. "Holt was young; he was a fine fellow," Dr. Sandridge would say, "but he wanted to be broken in a bit; when he was a little older he would soon find out

that his pet theories would not hold water, and the sooner he threw them overboard the better."

It must be owned that Dr. Holt was not a favourite with his professional colleagues. The elder men, who expected due deference from their junior, were affronted by the young man's independence and audacity: he had a habit of sticking to his opinion and maintaining it in an aggressive way that secretly excited their wrath. But for Dr. Weston, who had been his father's friend and medical adviser, Peter would have stood alone in Abbey-Thorpe; as it was, Dr. Weston was a kind-hearted, honest man, and warmly attached to all the members of the Holt family, and Peter owed him many a timely and valuable hint, and many a crumb of professional help when things seemed at a low ebb.

Peter, who had just attained his thirtieth year, was considerably older than his three sisters. Besides Willoughby, there had been two other girls, Kate and Maggie, who had died in early childhood; and Vera, who was two-and-twenty, had been regarded by her brother as a mere child until her mother's failing health compelled her to take control of the household. Ranee was just two years younger than her sister; but Sallie, who was eighteen, and was somewhat childish for her age, had only recently regarded herself as a grown-up lady, and it had required much persuasion on her sisters' part before she would allow her hair to be coiled in the prevailing fashion—never was there a girl more devoid of vanity.

St. Andrew's Street, where the Holts lived, was the most imposing street in Abbey-Thorpe. It was unusually broad and open, and with its avenue of trees resembled some boulevard. On one side were old-fashioned shops interspersed with houses, and on the other some handsome

residences with walled-in gardens. The largest of these belonged to Dr. Sandridge, and the pretty low house a few doors lower down was owned by Dr. Weston—for St. Andrew's Street, with its open space and pleasant leafy shade, was largely affected by the medical faculty. The façade of the Town Hall faced the lower end of St. Andrew's Street, and at the upper end stood St. Andrew's Church and its fine large churchyard. Passing from the busy High Street and the bustling activity that prevails under the shadow of the Clock Tower, there is a wonderful air of repose in the delightful environment of St. Andrew's Street.

In the wide spaces the children are playing, not noisily, but with rapt enjoyment, the few passers-by have a leisurely air, the gilt angel over the quaint little woolshop glitters like a golden image in the sunshine, the trees are unfurling their tender spring foliage, here and there are curious little fenced-in shrubberies—green oases of trees and bushes only tenanted by nesting birds.

The Red House was nearly opposite St. Andrew's. Across the wide boulevard was one of these tiny shrubberies and a row of low white cottages abutting on the churchyard. The outlook was singularly quiet and peaceful, and hallowed by the thought of dear ones laid to rest in the shady corner behind St. Andrew's. The Red House was by no means an attractive-looking abode to a stranger; it strongly resembled the house a child always draws on its slate—three steps and a door, with a narrow window on one side and two equally narrow ones on the other, and four upper ones placed at equal distances above them, topped by an attic or two. No architecture could be more grotesquely simple or more uninteresting; but however disappointing the frontage might be, the draw-

visitors and callers, was a charming old-fa
, and a perfect nest of comfort.
was a long, narrow room, somewhat low,
door opening on a lawn as smooth as a b
ı, with a rustic arbour at the end. At one ti
›w windows, to match the front, had light
, but some years before Mr. Holt had thro
ge bay window to give greater space, and th
a great improvement. It was here that th
heir work-table and Sallie planted her easel, fc
sociable young creatures and loved to be to
easy-chair placed so invitingly near was alway
'eter.
e other end of the room was reserved for
ıoons and evenings. Here, in front of the fire
led at her little tea-table, while against th
the great Chesterfield couch, where Peter lo
: his lazy length when he had an hour's leis
ıich the whole family would comfortably en
elves for a delightful chat in the gloaming. "
minds being crushed, if we only sit quiet."

phiniums and giant poppies, marigolds, pansies, yellow tiger lillies, and roses mingled in sweet confusion and formed a background of bloom. Beyond the arbour there was a small kitchen-garden, with mossy old apple and pear trees laden with fruit. In this little plot of ground Peter would dig and delve at his own sweet will, to the huge delight of Waif, a handsome wire-haired terrier who, having lost his bearings and his lawful owner, had followed Peter home one hot summer's day and flatly refused to leave him. Since then Waif had become a member of the family, and even Judith the strong-armed, who wielded a broom to the terror of all mischievous urchins and thieving cats, succumbed to the plaintive appeal in Waif's brown eyes and consented to let him lie on the kitchen hearth-rug.

Judith was their sole domestic, with the exception of a diminutive youth rejoicing in the name of Ebenezer Such, who cleaned the knives and boots and was also the errand-boy of the establishment.

Peter always declared with an air of triumph that Judith was his special discovery; she was the creature of his bow and spear, his treasure-trove. When he cut a slice of her delicious home-made bread, he would often lay down the knife with a conscious smile, which his sisters knew how to interpret. "This woman is simply unique," it would say; "but for me, Judith would never have found her way to the Red House; you have to thank me for this paragon of servants;" and it must be owned that this assertion was substantially correct.

It was during Mrs. Holt's last illness, when the domestic establishment at the Red House was sadly disorganised, and Vera, young and inexperienced, was almost at her wits' end, that Peter suddenly came to the rescue.

At that time he was house-surgeon in one of the London Hospitals, and he was on duty one evening when a poor fellow was brought into the accident ward. He had been run over and injured internally, and only lingered for a few days.

During the period that preceded his death he was visited daily by his wife, a strong, dark-complexioned young woman with a deep voice. The contrast between the wife and husband struck Peter rather forcibly—the tall, muscular woman and the sickly, narrow-chested man. He was a tailor, and had contracted a stoop that was almost a deformity; but it was evident that a strong affection united them.

Peter, who was engaged with a patient close by, overheard a few sentences pass between them.

"It is all over with me, Jue," gasped the poor fellow, "and I doubt we have got to part. It is a mercy the little 'un was taken last year; but I'd die easier if I knew what thou wilt do with thyself, lass."

"Don't you trouble your head about me, Jem, I'll do finely." Here there was a catch in the deep voice, and Judith brushed something off her face hastily. "I can work—aye, I can work, as other folks do."

"Why not go back to service?" pleaded the man. "There's no little kid to keep you at home now, and you were always a rare hand with the cleaning and baking; you'll be more comfortable;" and then Jem could say no more. Peter hastened to his side, but there was little to be done, and that night he died.

The whole incident had slipped out of Peter's memory, much as it had interested him at the time, when three weeks later he came suddenly on Judith in a dark entry near the hospital. She was hurrying past him, when he

stopped and spoke to her kindly. She looked very worn and jaded in her poor, shabby mourning, and he could see she had been weeping, but she answered his questions very quietly.

She was doing a day's charing. Her clergyman had got her the job, and she was thankful to take any work that came to hand. She was looking out for a situation as general servant. Her landlady and her clergyman's wife would speak for her respectability; and as she said this a sudden inspiration came to Peter.

That very day Vera had written in despair. The cook had been tipsy and her father had packed her off; and the housemaid had given warning, and nothing would induce her to stay her month. "In two or three days we shall be without a servant," wrote the poor girl, "and shall have no one but a charwoman." Peter was not long making up his mind.

"Look here, Mrs. Bell," he said quietly, "there is a situation ready for you if you care to take it; my people are in trouble." And then, in a few concise words, Peter put the whole case before her.

His mother was ill, and they had just lost a brother, and his sisters were young and inexperienced and needed help; but almost before he had finished his explanation Judith looked straight at him.

"You need not say any more, Doctor; I will take the place as soon as you like, and do my best for the poor things. Mrs. Martin will speak for me; I will give you her address, and she will tell you that Judith Bell can work." And twenty-four hours later the newly made widow entered the kitchen at the Red House, to the infinite comfort and relief of her young mistresses.

Chapter II

RE HANNAH BURKE

I only pretend to be a plain, good-humored young fellow.—SCOTT.

Never think yourself safe because you do your duty in ninety-nine points; it is the hundredth which is to be the ground of your trial.—ANON.

THE case of Hannah Burke had been discreetly adjourned until the domestic oracle had returned, but as the three girls busied themselves over their different avocations—while Vera mended the household linen, and Ranee made the bobbins fly, and Sallie painted in a cloud or two—more than once the same thought occurred to them: What would their friends at Abbey-Thorpe say if Miss Burke were to be included in their list of acquaintances? Was Peter really serious or only jesting when he had hinted the previous evening that it would only be a kindly act on their part to call on her?" "The poor thing must be so lonely," he had remarked, but no one had answered him. Vera, who was at the other end of the room, had pretended not to hear, and Ranee, who was seldom at a loss, created a diversion by calling Waif's attention to a strange cat sitting on the wall, and the next moment there was pandemonium and the excitement of the chase. Even Peter lost the thread of his subject as he watched the dog's frantic leaps in the vain attempt to reach his lawful prey. Puss only doubled up her paws comfortably

under her soft breast, as she gazed at the harlequinade below, with a feline grin of amusement; she was a mature cat of much experience, and knew her enemy of old.

The subject had been dropped for that evening, but Peter would certainly recur to it again—they knew him well enough to be sure of that. He had a retentive memory, and was ready to take any amount of trouble for any one who seemed to need his assistance, and more than once his sisters had heard him speak of this same Hannah Burke in decidedly eulogistic terms. "Miss Burke was a good creature; she had done her duty nobly by the old woman, and he was unfeignedly glad that Mrs. Wallace had remembered her so kindly. She had done the correct thing, and he did not care what the gossips thought; they might say that Miss Burke had feathered her nest—there were people in the world who would say anything—but he did not believe them all the same, it was just envy and spite," and so on; for Peter was a born fighter, and would take up the cudgels on behalf of any one he thought ill-used.

More than once, too, he had spoken of the young woman's loneliness. "She has not a single friend in Abbey-Thorpe; she told me so," he remarked once, and Ranee had felt sure that their want of response had somewhat disappointed him.

The facts of the case were these:—

For some months Dr. Holt's list of patients—not a long one, alas—included a certain Mrs. Wallace, a lady of advanced age, living in a pretty old-fashioned house in the Colnbrook Road.

Miss Burke, or Hannah Burke, as she was generally called, had lived with her some years in the capacity of housekeeper and nurse, and as time went on and Mrs.

Wallace became attached to her, she also filled the position of her companion.

Mrs. Wallace was a gentlewoman and extremely kind-hearted, but she was full of cranks. All her life, to use her own expression, she had enjoyed poor health, and though her ailments were by no means serious, they had furnished her with daily interest and occupation, and the ever-recurring duty of examining each symptom under a species of magnifying-glass, and the detailing them to her intimate friends with a view of evolving sympathy, left her no time for dulness or monotony.

In a word, though in many respects a sound-hearted and kindly woman, Mrs. Wallace was a superb egotist, and so much wrapped up in her own troublesome nerve tissues that she had very little time to give to the claims of others; in plain language, though well-meaning and pleasant-spoken, she was certainly selfish. But, notwithstanding, Hannah Burke loved her, and tended her with the affectionate observance of a daughter.

One of Mrs. Wallace's favourite fads was a change of medical advisers; no matter how clever or kind her doctor might be, or how well he understood her constitution, after a time she grew weary of him and found fault with his prescriptions. Dr. Sandridge, the leading physician in Abbey-Thorpe and its environs, had been mortally offended by being superseded by Dr. Weston; he in turn had been shunted in favour of a certain Dr. Pryor, whose practice lay in the lower part of the town. Possibly in this case distance lent enchantment to the view, for a nearer acquaintance was not wholly satisfactory. Dr. Pryor, in spite of his cleverness, was a little brusque and rough in manner, and one morning, when Mrs. Wallace felt unusually nervous and out of order, she wrote a hand-

some cheque for Dr. Pryor and sent in hot haste for Dr. Holt. The old lady took a great fancy to her new adviser —Peter was generally liked by his patients—but how long her partiality would have lasted, and how soon Peter might have received his *congé*, could only be dimly conjectured by previous example, for before many months were over Mrs. Wallace really fell ill, and succumbed to an acute attack of influenza.

During her short illness Hannah Burke had nursed her with such devotion and untiring patience that Dr. Holt had secretly marvelled at her.

"Why not take up nursing as your profession?" he had said one day to her, but that was before the will was read.

Mrs. Wallace, who was absolutely devoid of relatives, had bequeathed her house, furniture, and a comfortable and sufficient income to her faithful housekeeper and friend Hannah Burke, in return for ten years of devoted service. "She will make good use of the money, and there is not a creature in the world who has claims on me," Mrs. Wallace had said to the lawyer, when he looked at her dubiously as he received these instructions. Peter was present when Hannah received the news of her inheritance. She had seemed at first more bewildered than pleased with her good fortune; she turned on the lawyer almost sharply.

"You ought not to have let her do it, Mr. Macree!" she exclaimed; "it is not fair that all that money should come to me. I am strong, I have my health, and I can get my own living, thank God. And a hundred or two would have set me up nicely in the world." And it was some time before the two gentlemen could pacify her scruples, and induce her to accept her mistress's bounty. Peter pretended to lose patience with her at last. "Most lega-

tees would look a bit cheerful if all these good things had fallen to their share," he said, rallying her, but Hannah shook her head.

"Wayside is a dear little house and I love it," she sighed, "and I have had many happy days here; but I doubt if I can go on living here alone." And now a tear stole down her pale face. "How am I to pass the days, Dr. Holt, with no one to fuss over and wait upon from morning until night? It is not as though I were a fine lady, and had my piano and sketch-book and fancy-work. I am just a plain working woman, as you know, Doctor, and I can't pretend to be different." And though Peter answered her playfully, and tried to rouse her to a more cheerful view of life, he was secretly impressed by her sincerity and honesty, and it was after this little scene that he had spoken of her to his sisters and called her a good creature.

Mrs. Wallace had only a few friends in Abbey-Thorpe, and the Holts had not been amongst her acquaintances, so the girls had only seen Hannah Burke at church. Peter had once pointed her out to Vera and Ranee. "That is Mrs. Wallace's housekeeper," he had said, as they followed her into the churchyard; and as she stopped at the gate a moment to give Peter a message, they had a good view of her.

She was a tall, rather massive young woman, with a pale face and reddish-brown hair, and she looked strong and sensible. Vera spoke approvingly of her dress: it was so quiet and unobtrusive, just as a young woman ought to dress in her position, and Ranee had assented to this.

"She has nice eyes, but she looks grave," she added; "I daresay she has a dull life of it, poor thing;" and

then they had dismissed the subject of Hannah Burke from their minds.

But here it was cropping up again, and Ranee frowned a little over her bobbins, as she wondered whether she should take the bull by the horns during luncheon, and make Peter understand for once in his life that even a brother's prerogative has its limits, and that a lady's visiting list must be regarded as sacred; but on second thoughts she decided to wait until the unwelcome topic was mooted again, and then they must really make a fight for it.

Just as she arrived at this decision, the well-known sound of the latch-key reached their ears, and the next moment there were brisk footsteps, and Peter—the real, living, redoubtable Peter—entered the room.

In a moment there was a little bustle and movement. Vera gave him a greeting smile, and hurried off to see after the luncheon, Peter's meals being the important events of the day. Sallie jumped up from her painting and gave him a kiss, and Ranee pushed aside her lace pillow and prepared herself to be sociable; while Peter, with a friendly nod that comprehended his family circle, delivered himself of his usual remark:

"Tell old Judith to hurry up; I am as hungry as a hunter." But Vera was already in the kitchen, and by this time Judith knew her master's ways.

Dr. Holt was a fair, young-looking man, and people often said that there was something boyish about him. Without being exactly handsome, he had an attractive personality. He had singularly blue eyes, and they were so bright and vivid and penetrating that they often took people by surprise; but he had a sympathetic manner, that won his patients' confidence.

"The Doctor always seems so sorry if one feels bad, and that makes a fellow buck up and put a good face on it," remarked one man whom Peter was attending. And another rough customer, a well-known black sheep in Abbey-Thorpe, observed one day to his wife:

"I don't know how it is, missus, but the Doctor has got a way with him that forces the truth out of a chap—one couldn't tell him a lie for ever so. I have tried again and again"—and here Andy indulged in strong language —"but somehow the truth always sneaks out."

Peter was not aware of his own magnetic influence. He was a simple, sweet-tempered fellow, with a natural fund of animal spirits, and with an immense kindness for all human creatures. He had all the instincts of the physician and the born healer—a boundless compassion for suffering humanity, and a determination to do his level best to fight disease and relieve pain, and the only time he was ever seriously vexed with one of his sisters was when Vera wanted him to stay in one bitter winter's night to nurse a cold. Peter's reprimand had been so severe and scathing that Vera had been reduced to tears, though a sneeze or two had somewhat impaired the dignity of Peters' closing sentence. "If I am only to be a fair-weather doctor, I may as well shut up shop at once," he had growled. "Suppose you tell Ebenezer to extinguish the lamp over the door, Sallie. Oh no, stop, I might sprain my ankle going down the three steps in the dark. Why are you giggling, you irreverent child? Don't you know your precious brother ought to be wrapped in cotton-wool and put on the shelf in such weather as this? Tell that sister of yours that she is a very foolish young woman, and you are another;" and here followed another portentous sneeze.

Poor Vera, she was sadly crushed by her brother's satire, but she bore no malice. When Peter had left the house she went up to his room and lighted his fire with her own hands. When Peter returned two hours later, from a painful death-scene, with aching head and limbs, and shivering with cold and fatigue, he found a warm, cosy room awaiting him.

The fire was blazing, his dressing-gown and slippers were placed in readiness, and a little black kettle singing on the hob, and a tray with a certain jovial-looking Dutch-built decanter and a lemon beside it, suggested the making of hot toddy without delay.

"Bless her little heart!" exclaimed Peter affectionately, as he mixed the steaming beverage sweet and strong, and then retired soothed and comforted to his warm bed, blissfully unaware that Vera had stolen across the passage in her stocking-feet to be sure that all was well with him before she slept.

Meals are rarely punctual in a doctor's house, but at the Red House the girls were seldom kept waiting for either luncheon or supper, the truth being that Peter as yet had few patients, and not even Vera, who had an anxious mind, could fear his being overworked. On this occasion Peter had seen all his patients between breakfast and luncheon, although one of them had lived a mile or two out of Abbey-Thorpe.

It was probably the walk in the fresh, sweet morning air that made Peter so hungry; but he had a healthy appetite at all times, and he discussed the simple, well-cooked viands set before him with such evident enjoyment that his young housekeeper was charmed; and Judith of the strong arms set down the jam-roll with an air of triumph. Peter had a boyish, inveterate fancy for jam.

There was the usual cheerful flow of conversation during the meal. Peter retailed every interesting scrap of intelligence that he had gleaned during his walks abroad: little chats with his neighbours; he had met Margaret Weston, and had walked through the town with her, and, wait a moment, she had sent a message to Ranee. She wanted her to come across and have tea with her, as she would like to have her help with some work.

"Good old Margaret—of course I will go," and Ranee looked well pleased. In spite of their difference in age, she and Margaret were great friends. "You won't mind, Vera? I daresay Sallie will walk with you;" for in their daily intercourse the girls showed a sweet courtesy that had been early inculcated by their mother.

"Never forget to be polite to each other," she would say to her little girls. "Treat your sisters just as you would treat any other young lady." And once she remarked that "Bear and forbear" ought to be written up over every nursery and schoolroom mantelpiece. "You have no idea how smoothly household machinery goes if it is well greased with patience and civility;" for Mrs. Holt had been a shrewd, sensible woman, and had brought up her young daughters with a wise tenderness beautiful to witness.

"Oh, by the bye, I have an errand for you, girls," struck in Peter rather abruptly, when Ranee had made her civil little speech. "Of course Ranee must go to Miss Weston; she wants to finish off some bazaar things, and really needs help. So if you and Sallie have no special object for your walk, Vera, you might as well look in at Wayside."

"At Wayside? My dear Peter——" Signals of distress between the three girls. It was Vera who had been

addressed and must answer; but Peter, who was busy with the biscuits and cheese, seemed oblivious of his sister's discomposure.

"I saw Miss Burke this morning," he went on calmly, "and I told her that I should ask you to call. I think I said something about it yesterday, but I don't remember your answering me. I daresay Miss Burke will be expecting you, so you may as well go this afternoon."

The oracle had spoken with a vengeance; not even a loophole for escape, not a doubt of their acquiescence—the matter treated as a dead certainty! No wonder Ranee secretly rebelled. Now was the moment for her fine speech: "There are limits even to a brother's prerogative. A lady's visiting list should be regarded as sacred," and so on; and why did she hesitate at that critical moment, when Vera needed her help? Was it the confiding look in Peter's blue eyes that so suddenly disarmed her?

Vera waited vainly for her old ally. "But, Peter dear," she began at last feebly, "there is no need to do things so quickly. We have not made up our minds whether we want to know Miss Burke. In our position," gathering courage as she proceeded, "we ought to be so careful. Miss Burke may be a good young woman, but she was only Mrs. Wallace's housekeeper, and people might think it strange if we called on her. Ranee, I know, agrees with me; don't you, Ray?" Then did Peter lay down his buttered biscuit, and an expression of profound disgust overspread his countenance. There was mutiny in the camp, and his vigilant soul scented the battle from afar.

"Great Scott," he groaned, "to think that my father's daughter can talk such rot! My good child, what does it matter what all the fools and fogies of Abbey-Thorpe think? Take my word for it, all the right-minded people

will be on our side. Stick to the point, my dear. Are you or are you not disposed to be kind and friendly to a well-meaning and well-behaved young woman—in other words, to do your duty to your neighbour Miss Burke?"

"We had much rather not, Peter," faltered Vera. Basely deserted as she was by Ranee, she would not yield the point. "You know that we always do what you wish, but in this case, as Ranee says, we ought to judge for ourselves.. If we call on Miss Burke, she will, of course, return it, and this will lead to some degree of intimacy, and really Hannah Burke is not a lady. You know her mother was a factory girl, and her father——" but Peter would hear no more.

"Never mind ancient history," he returned quickly. "Thank you, my dear, I quite understand you; there is no need to say any more. You are a free agent, and so is Ranee. Sallie is too young to count." And then Peter rose from the table, and, looking calmly on the three discomfited faces, he left the room with Waif at his heels, and a moment later they heard the street door close.

"He has gone out without a word—oh, Ranee, call him back!" exclaimed Vera almost hysterically. "Tell him we did not mean—tell him anything." But Ranee was too late; her brother was walking rapidly down St. Andrew's Street, and never answered her shrill whistle.

Thus did Peter, by a simple ruse, quell the domestic mutiny. How could they guess that he had discovered before luncheon that his tobacco-jar was empty, and that it behoved him to replenish it before night? If he had not met the vicar, and been inveigled by him into paying a visit to two old women in the alms-houses, he would have been back in ten minutes. As it was, more than an hour elapsed before he let himself into the Red House.

Chapter III

"THE FUTURE MR. PETER"

She must be lovely, and constant, and kind,
Holy and pure and humble of mind,
Blithe of cheer and gentle of mood,
Courteous and generous and noble of blood.
Bridal of Triermain.

A thoroughgoing friend that understands a hint is worth a million.—SCOTT.

MRS. BURSTOCK, who was one of the oldest inhabitants of St. Andrew's alms-houses, and who spent her life in wishing vainly to repair and set in order the worn-out machinery of an enfeebled and aged body, was as usual detailing a long list of importunate ailments in her thin strident voice, when she was appalled to see a smile of jovial enjoyment on her doctor's face.

"A broad grin it were," as she observed afterwards to her crony and next-door neighbour. "Oh, it was all very well for him to put me off with nervous twitches, following whooping-cough as a child, and calling it by some learned name. A grin's a grin all the world over, and Anna Maria Burstock isn't the woman to be sauced by a doctor lad young enough to be her grandson." Indeed, the old woman's feelings had been so much injured by that unlucky smile that Dr. Holt had only patched up a hollow truce by giving her a shilling and promising her a larger bottle of physic than usual.

Peter took himself soundly to task for that untime smile. He had Mrs. Burstock's list of ailments so well l heart that he considered that it was safe to let his attentio wander; when she stopped he would be ready with h sympathy and prompt remedies. But unfortunately b fore that point had been reached the remembrance of hi masterly retreat from the Red House overcame him, an with difficulty he restrained an audible chuckle. He wa rubbing his hands with huge enjoyment when he foun the old woman's reproachful eyes fixed on him.

"I am glad you are amused, Doctor," and Mrs. Bu stock drew herself up stiffly; and then it was that in h embarrassment poor Peter made his lame excuses.

Meanwhile the three unlucky mutineers regarded eac other with frightened faces.

"Oh, Ranee, what shall we do?" and Vera with dif culty suppressed a sob. "Peter has never done such thing before. Oh, how vexed he must be!" For ho could the poor girl know about the tobacco-jar? Ho could they guess all the wily stratagem that was to bri them to instant submission?

"I will give them five minutes," the young autocr had said to himself as he walked down the street; a though he heard Ranee's whistle behind him, he kne better than to turn his head. He would do his erra without unduly hurrying himself; and then there h been that unlucky encounter with the vicar, and the t minutes' penance had been prolonged.

"What are we to do?" retorted Ranee impatient "Why, you and Sallie must call at Wayside. How c you hesitate, Vera? Of course we hate to do it, but an thing is better than offending Peter."

"Oh yes, I suppose so;" but Vera spoke in a sore

humiliated tone. "But all the same I don't think that Peter is quite kind about it," and Vera's pretty eyes filled with tears. "He ought not to want us to do things we dislike. And then not to listen to me when I tried to explain, but to push back his chair and leave the room in that abrupt way!"

"I don't think he was really angry though," observed Sallie, who was very quick in noticing things. "I am sure that he was trying not to smile as he left the room." But neither Vera nor Ranee would endorse this; their own consciences were accusing them too loudly. Peter thought them selfish, proud, and stuck-up. He had no patience with such feminine, conventional views; his masculine mind was broader and more elastic, and embraced a larger survey of life. After all, perhaps he was right and they wrong; it was not quite nice or Christian of them to refuse to befriend a young woman who was in so solitary a position. How could it hurt them to show Hannah Burke a little kindness? Yes, certainly they must make the *amende honorable*. They would go that very afternoon and get it over.

"But I won't go without you, Ranee," finished Vera, when they had arrived at this point; "I tell you that flatly. Sallie is not a bit of use on a first call—one might as well take a mouse out visiting."

"I am sure I don't want to go, Vera," in rather an affronted tone; for Sallie had her feelings.

"But you forget Margaret Weston!" exclaimed Ranee. "There are all those bazaar things to finish, and Peter said that I ought to go."

"To-morrow will do just as well," replied Vera firmly; "the bazaar is not until next Tuesday, so there is nearly a week. We will just go across and tell Margaret how

drew's Street on their way to Wynyarc
:ston's house was called, at the very moment
s misbehaving himself in Mrs. Burstock's
r. Dr. Weston was a widower, and Margai
e surviving child. She was by no means you
ained her eight-and-thirtieth birthday. N
: ever been conspicuous for good looks; ind
candidly, she was an extremely plain youn
: she was a delightful person for all that, ;
ecially was devoted to her.

Margaret was clever and intellectual; she
ezy views on most subjects, and Peter w
d her up as an example to his sisters, and e
take her as their pattern.

' There is no humbug about her," he would
erfectly sincere, and always the same, and
t of person that one would like to have o
rmy weather "—which was high praise
t. But in reality she was a sensible and s
nan, and one of the happiest creatures in th

then there is housekeeping, gardening, and Braille, and a dozen other delightful things to make one wish the days were longer."

The drawing-room at Wynyards was a very pleasant one, and like the Holts Margaret used it as a living-room, and the round table at one end was strewn with shreds of cloth and silks, for the making of the pin-cushions so abhorred by Sallie.

Margaret made no attempt to appear young. She dressed well, but rather in advance of her age. She had dark hair already streaked with grey, and her clear, honest brown eyes were her most attractive feature. Like her father she was thin, muscular, and large-boned, but she was also extremely lady-like.

Her face lighted up with obvious pleasure as the three girls advanced into the room. "Oh, you dear good creatures!" she exclaimed; "I only expected Ranee, but three pairs of hands will make the work fly." But Margaret's satisfaction was somewhat damped when she found Sallie was to be the helper for the afternoon.

"We cannot help ourselves, Margaret," explained Vera; "I cannot possibly spare Ray to you to-day. Sallie will do her best to be useful, and we will both come to-morrow if you like, but such an unfortunate thing has happened," and Vera in a distressed tone poured her story into Margaret's ears.

If Margaret was secretly surprised at Peter's request to his sisters, she kept her feelings to herself, and Ranee, who was watching her face anxiously, exclaimed in a tone of relief, "Then you don't think we are wrong in going, Margaret?"

"Wrong in doing as your brother wishes, my dear Ray! On the contrary, I think you are acting nobly.

After all, Miss Burke may be better than you think. I know father was very much pleased with her when he was called in on the night Mrs. Wallace died. I have never come across her myself."

"But you don't mean to call on her, Maggie?"

"My dear Ranee, there are fifty people in Abbey Thorpe on whom I never dream of calling. Miss Burke is only one of them. If father had wished me to call I should have made no demur. Life is not long enough for these sorts of quibbles."

And this settled the matter. Whatever Margaret's secret opinion might be, she most certainly approved of their carrying out Peter's wishes, and they took their leave with a lighter heart, leaving their unwilling hostage behind them.

Colnbrook Road was not far from St. Andrew's Street. It was a quiet country road. As they walked slowly up it, a lady and gentleman on horseback passed them at a foot-pace, followed by a groom. The gentleman was sitting very erect, and seemed lost in a brown study. He was a grey-haired man with a brown, weather-beaten face, and his companion was a fair, delicate-looking girl, mounted on a pretty chestnut mare.

"This is Mr. Ashton and his daughter," whispered Ranee as they passed—"Mr. Ashton of the Garth. Don't you wish we knew them, Vera? The Garth is such a lovely old place, and I like the look of Miss Ashton."

"I have never noticed her much myself," returned Vera; "she seems rather childish-looking and not specially pretty. Mr. Ashton is a fine-looking man, though he has a stern, rather forbidding expression;" and Ranee assented to this.

"I know Peter thinks they are nice," went on Ranee; "he told Margaret so once. I should be glad for his sake if we knew them." And here a glance of intelligence passed between the sisters, and then Ranee gave a conscious little giggle. Never were there three such innocent and yet designing match-makers as the Holt girls. The future Mrs. Peter—the much-to-be-envied and perfectly adorable young female who was to occupy the proud position of Peter's wife—engrossed a large portion of their thoughts. In the twilight, as they sat round the fire waiting for the sound of Peter's latchkey, the visionary "She" —that bundle of superlative virtues and impossible beauties—would be trotted out for the inspection of the sisterhood.

"I think no sister-in-law would be more beloved than Peter's wife would be," Ranee had said once quite seriously to her friend Margaret Weston. Margaret with difficulty suppressed a smile, but Ranee was such a stanch, loyal little soul that she would not have hurt her for the world.

But one afternoon, when the girl had been launching out rather recklessly on the subject, Margaret took her to task.

"My dear Ray," she said, "you have talked a lot of agreeable nonsense. In theory it all sounds very nice and charming, but I am not sure how it will work. It amuses you, I daresay, to class your young lady acquaintances, and to enrol them among the eligible and the ineligible candidates for the vacant throne. Indeed, I am afraid that it is no exaggeration to say that neither you nor Vera can pass a nice-looking girl in the street without trying to fit the Petrean cap on her ; but I should like to know what you would all feel if one fine summer's day Dr. Peter

quietly informed you that he was going to be married." The families being extremely intimate, Margaret would often call him Dr. Peter to his face. "I don't suppose you would find the reality as agreeable as you think."

Ranee reddened like an indignant turkey-cock. "Margaret, how can you say such things? Don't you know us better by this time? Do you think that we are so selfish, that Peter's happiness is not our first consideration, that we should not rejoice with our whole soul that our dear boy should have his heart's desire?" Ranee spoke with such energy that Margaret was perplexed.

"But, my dear child," she returned, "I don't think you selfish in the least; it would be perfectly natural for you to feel regret under such circumstances—you are such a happy and united household, and your brother's marriage would make such a difference in your lives."

"Of course we know that," returned Ranee impatiently. "Vera and I have talked about it ever since we grew up; we thought it better to get used to the idea, and so we made our plans. It is so much better to face the thing, and then we shall not be taken by surprise. Let me tell you what we mean to do, Margaret; you are so sensible, and you are just like one of ourselves, and I don't think Vera will mind." And then did Margaret dispose herself to listen comfortably while Ranee expounded her parable.

"You know we have a little money of our own, Maggie," she began; "it has been so well invested that it brings us in fifty pounds a year each. That is quite a nice little sum, and of course we subscribe to the housekeeping." Margaret nodded; she already knew that. "Then Uncle Robert, father's younger brother, who lives in New Zealand, always sends us each a pound or two at Christmas. He is not rich, and has a large family, but he never

forgets us. We always put half in the savings-bank—our emergency fund we call it."

"That is a sensible plan of yours, Ray," in an approving tone.

"It was Vera's idea, and we all agreed to do it; but Peter always spends his present on us. Well, where was I?—oh! I know—so you see we are not utterly dependent on Peter. Now Sallie has ambitions—she means to be an artist—and when Mr. Carrick, the artist, was down here last summer Peter made him look over her drawings, and he thought she had really a good deal of talent, if she had only proper training. He told her that she ought to go to the Slade School or some good studio; but we should not like her to go to London alone, and under the present circumstances we could not leave Peter; but when he tells us that he means to be married, we shall just set the house in order and pack up, bag and baggage, and be off to London town."

"Good gracious, Ranee, you take my breath away! What a mine of undeveloped energy you are! London town, indeed, you poor, dear little innocents, and what do you propose to do when you get there?"

"Well, we shall take lodgings first, until we find a nice cheap little flat within walking distance of the studio. Sallie will become an art student at once, and Vera will look after her and do the housekeeping if we have a flat. We should not be able to afford a servant, and Vera would find plenty to do. I mean to look out for a secretary's place; I have learnt typing, and I think the work would just suit me; and while I am waiting I shall do my lace-work. Don't look so horrified, Maggie; we mean to be as jolly as possible. If Sallie goes to the Herkomer Studio, there are lots of nice, cheap little flats to be found

in the neighbourhood, and our emergency fund will enable us to furnish it prettily. Think how nice it will be to come back to our cosy little nest in the evening and find Vera laying the supper-table, and everything bright and comfortable, and perhaps a letter from Peter waiting to be read. How hungry we shall be, and how we shall talk over the day's experiences! Oh, there will be no need to pity us," finished Ranee, with a little laugh.

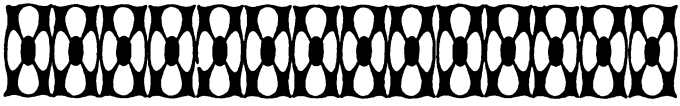
There was an odd little lump in Margaret's throat as she tried to answer, and somehow words failed her, but she felt as though she never loved Ranee more than she did that moment; and though she could not tell her so, she took the girl's glowing face between her hands and kissed it quietly. "Thank you for telling me, Ranee dear," she said at last. "You are very brave, and so is Vera. Your plan is not such a bad one after all;" but to Ranee's disappointment she would not discuss it further.

"After all, it was only a pretty day-dream," Margaret thought. The future, the actual future was on the knees of the gods. Margaret was too practical, too matter-of-fact to busy herself with visionary schemes, which might all melt into thin air. Vera, with her brilliant young beauty, to be cooking and housemaiding for her sisters in the miserable garrets that composed a cheap London flat —a sky-parlour and two or three dark cupboards adjoining! "I don't suppose Dr. Peter would allow it for a moment," she said to herself; "though to be sure that child Sallie is a born artist, and I know father thinks so;" and then Margaret sighed in rather a perplexed manner, and finally dismissed the subject from her mind.

This conversation had taken place about a month previously, and Ranee, who had been much impressed by Margaret's patient attention and her evident interest, had

told her sisters that she certainly approved of their plan, although she had been a little shy of discussing it. "I never saw her more affectionate," she continued. "Margaret is not often demonstrative, and seldom shows her feelings, but I am sure there were tears in her eyes as she kissed me. Maggie can be very nice when she likes." And the thought of her friend's tenderness made her happier all that day.

That was only a month ago; and now, as the sisters walked up Colnbrook Road, the same old thought had cropped up in each mind; and as the fair-haired young mistress of the Garth put her mare to a canter, Ranee raised her eyebrows and pursed up her mouth in a way Vera fully understood. "She is nice, therefore she would do for Peter," that was what her look conveyed, and Vera nodded assent.



Chapter IV

WAYSIDE AND ITS MISTRESS

We stand in certain relations to these other people. They have claims on us. We owe them duties, service, love. We cannot cut ourselves off from them, from any of them, and say they are nothing to us.—Rev. J. R. Miller.

Life were not worth the living
If no one were the better
For having met you on the way
And known the sunshine of your stay.
Anon.

The girls were in no hurry to reach their destination. The afternoon was so fine that Ranee had already hinted that their visit should be as short as civility permitted, and that they should extend their walk; but Vera thought that it would be better to go home first and see if Peter had returned.

"There will be plenty of time to have a stroll in the Abbey meadows before tea," she went on, "and we shall enjoy ourselves much more if we make it up with Peter. Oh, here we are at Wayside; it is rather a pretty little place." But Vera spoke in a grudging tone, as though it were an effort to praise anything belonging to Hannah Burke; and Ranee, who was in an equally ungracious mood, merely returned, "Oh, yes, it is pretty enough, I daresay," rather crossly; for in certain moods it is mentally fatiguing to express admiration. For it is a sad and

humiliating fact that even nature can wear her most beautiful aspect for us in vain, if we persist in regarding it through a thick grey veil; and if we have Sahara in our hearts the landscape at our feet may be like the Land of Beulah and yet give us no pleasure.

Wayside was really a charming house. It was a low grey cottage, clothed with creepers almost to the chimney-stacks. It had a wide deep porch full of hanging flower-baskets and plants, and a pretty old-fashioned garden lay round it. As the sisters walked up the path they had a glimpse of a sunny lawn, with some beehives and a sun-dial, and a rustic seat under a tree. Some doves were cooing in the distance, and a canary was singing loudly at an open window; pink and white May trees were filling the air with their fragrance. "Oh, Vera, if only some one nice lived here!" ejaculated Ranee, as she rang the bell. Happily she spoke in a low tone, for almost before the words were out of her lips the door opened and Miss Burke stood before them.

"I saw you coming up the path," she said in a friendly tone, in which, however, there was a trace of nervousness, "and as Jane was out, I was bound to open the door myself. Please come in, Miss Holt;" and Miss Burke, extending a large, capable-looking hand, gave Vera's so strong a grasp that the girl's soft little fingers tingled. Hannah Burke was certainly a muscular young woman.

"You knew us, then?" asked Ranee, who was generally the one to begin the conversation.

"Well, the Doctor was telling me this morning that you would probably call this afternoon," returned Hannah simply. "That is why I was vexed that Jane had to go to her mother; but the poor body is ill, and after all mothers are mothers, Miss Holt, so I could not

refuse to let her go. 'It is a bit awkward, Jane,' I said to her, 'but of course parents have the first claim,' and I hurried her off to catch her train. But there, I am keeping you standing," and Miss Burke led the way through the little sunshiny hall, and ushered them into one of the quaintest and prettiest rooms they had ever seen. To be sure, Peter had described it to them; "but hearing is not like seeing for oneself," as Ranee observed afterwards, and it was a fact that as the girls crossed the threshold the same words escaped them, "Oh, what a sweet old room!" to which Ranee added, "It has quite a story-book look about it," at which a little flush of pleasure came to Hannah Burke's face.

"Mrs. Wallace was very proud of it," she returned. "Oh, you are looking at the ingle-nook, Miss Holt; both the rooms have got that. I think myself it gives a cosy look to the place." But Ranee was too much engrossed to answer. No wonder Peter wanted them to call, if only to see that room. The ceiling was low, and a broad cross-way beam made it apparently lower still; but the open window, framed in greenery, gave abundance of light. Some Guelder roses thrust their soft heads almost into the room. The fireplace was in an angle at the farther end, and a broad cushioned seat, built into the wall, formed a most inviting cosy corner; another window lighted this recess, and a deep low easy-chair and round table stood beside the hearth. Vera guessed that the Bible and spectacle-case and old-fashioned rosewood workbox had belonged to Mrs. Wallace. The furniture was charmingly antique. There were delightful old Chippendale cabinets full of china and curious shells; one or two spindle-legged tables and a spinning wheel and a harp added to the picturesque effect, and even the stiff little high-backed couch

seemed in harmony with the whole. There was nothing modern. The carpet, which had once been handsome, looked a little worn and faded, and the tapestry curtains had seen their best days; even the shabby footstools bore evidence of the mistress's handiwork, although the silken stitches were half-obliterated by age and use. The sweet faint odour of dried rose leaves evidently proceeded from the dark purple jars on either side of the fireplace. The one thing incongruous was the presence of Hannah Burke herself; the strong, vigorous young woman seemed curiously out of place in that dainty environment, where the scent of pot-pourri and a hundred carefully treasured relics spoke unmistakably of culture and refinement and the taste of a bygone age.

Now, Hannah Burke was essentially modern. She looked the incarnation of practical everyday utility and common-sense in her black stuff dress, over which she wore a white linen apron with a bib, as though to protect her new mourning. Vera said afterwards that if she had only worn a cap she would have looked like a nursing sister, with her deep linen cuffs and collar; "but it suited her very well," continued the young critic. "I thought her rather a nice-looking person, Ray." Ranee averred that she thought so, too. Miss Burke's paleness seemed normal, but her complexion was perfectly clear and healthy, and the reddish-brown hair looked almost copper-coloured in the sunlight. There was something pleasing, too, in her expression and the straightforward look of her grey eyes; and though it was clearly impossible to regard her as a gentlewoman, there was no doubt that Peter was right in recommending her to their kindness. The poor young woman certainly looked far from happy, in spite of her lovely little house and all the good things that had

fallen to her. "I wonder how old she is," thought Ranee, as she tried to fit her neat little figure into the corner of the uncompromising couch, which steadily refused to accommodate her, until Hannah came to her rescue and recommended her to try the cosy corner.

"That sofa is just made to break one's back," she observed, as she established Ranee comfortably in her nook. "I always told dear Mrs. Wallace that it was made for show, and not for use; but it was her mother's and she set a deal of store by it. Now, Miss Holt, I must ask you to excuse me for a minute while I bring in the tea; it is all ready, and the cake's done to a turn, and I have only to boil up the kettle."

"Oh, thank you so much, Miss Burke, but we couldn't possibly stay to tea," exclaimed Vera, aghast at this offer of hospitality. Of course Peter had let them in for this. He had told her they were coming, and she had got things in preparation. "We never have tea so early, do we, Ranee?" looking at her sister anxiously.

"Not very often," returned Ranee, who was too honest to fib; for Judith, who spoilt her young mistresses, often indulged them by bringing them unexpected cups of tea, when she had reason to suppose her master would be late. "But we could not stay now, really," she added, feeling that she had not sufficiently supported Vera.

"But there is a loaf of currant bread freshly baked," pleaded Hannah, "and the cake has not long been out of the oven, and I have set the tea-cups, and I do hope you will stay; it will be a charity if you will, for it has been a long day, without a soul to speak to but Tabby and her kittens, except a few words exchanged with the Doctor this morning."

Now, was it the thought of the hot cake, in which

Ranee's soul delighted, or Hannah's pathetic tone, that made the girl hesitate? But the next moment she astonished her sister by saying quickly—

"Oh, I think we can stay a little longer, Vera. If you are sure it is not too much trouble, Miss Burke?" Then again there was a sudden flush on Hannah's pale face.

"If you knew what a pleasure it is to take trouble for some one," she said impulsively; and then, checking herself abruptly, she begged them to amuse themselves in her absence.

"What on earth made you give in like that, Ray?" exclaimed Vera in a vexed tone, as soon as the door closed. "I could hardly believe my ears. After all, I think it would have been better to have brought Sallie." Then Ranee blushed in some confusion over her own inconsistency.

"I could not help it, dear; I really could not. The poor thing looked so disappointed. I am sure she is dreadfully dull and lonely, and it won't do us any harm to stop and cheer her up for half-an-hour." And then Ranee plucked up spirit and struck one of her absurd attitudes, which always accompanied an apt quotation: 'It is my duty, and I will,' and 'I shall so enjoy a slice of that currant bread.'

"Greedy child," began Vera, but there was relenting in her voice; and then the door opened again and their hostess appeared, carrying an old-fashioned tea-tray with beautiful Crown Derby tea-cups on it. As she crossed the room Vera could not help admiring the tall, fine proportions of her figure; it might be a little too massive, but the head was grandly set on the full white throat, and she had a free, easy carriage that seemed natural to her. Ranee, who was fond of doing impulsive and unexpected

things, jumped up from her chair. "Oh, do let me come and help you," she said, in such a winsome tone that Hannah smiled.

"Oh, there is nought—I mean, nothing to do, but you shall come with me and welcome;" and they both disappeared before Vera could remonstrate.

"Oh, if I had only brought Sallie," she sighed, "instead of that ridiculous little cat of a Ranee;" and then she examined one of the quaint old-fashioned tea-spoons, and gloated covetously over a squat little silver cream-jug. "Fancy all those lovely things wasted on a young woman in a bib-apron," she thought regretfully.

The next moment Miss Burke returned with the teapot and the currant loaf, and Ranee followed with the cake. She was holding up her dress in a curious way, and displaying her neat skirt and a pair of pretty ankles.

"Look what I have got, Vera!" she exclaimed ecstatically, and she held up two small, squirming kittens. "Aren't they dear things? Look, their eyes are opened. Ah, there comes the mother to look after them," and puss came to her feet with a protesting mew, and then with the dauntlessness of maternal love jumped into her lap.

"Oh, Tabby, how can you be so bold and unmannerly?" observed her mistress, as Tabby gave hard licks to each soft little body in turns. "My dear young lady, you can't have the whole family in your lap and take your tea at the same time. I will just fetch Tabby's basket and make her comfortable, for she won't be parted from those babies for a moment; it is just the same mother-love from cat to Queen all the world over, and there is nothing more beautiful to my mind. I could not help saying so to the Doctor when he was taking notice of Tabby this morning."

"Peter loves cats and all animals," returned Ranee. And then Tabby and the kittens being comfortably established in their basket, Miss Burke invited her guests to gather round the little table, and proceeded with punctilious politeness to find out their tastes with regard to sugar and cream.

There could be no doubt that the girls enjoyed their tea. Even Vera owned afterwards that it had been a perfect feast of good things. "It was not only that the tea was so delicious, and the currant bread and butter and the hot cake such a treat," she explained to Sallie; "but I think we enjoyed it all the more because the cups and saucers were so lovely, and it was such a pleasure to stir one's tea with those dear little spoons. Ranee felt the same, I know." Then Sallie looked at them a little sadly, as though she felt defrauded of her share of good things.

Miss Burke looked positively happy as she pressed one dainty after another on her guests. "Dear me, how nice this is," she observed presently; "I haven't felt so cheerful since my dear old lady left me. It is terrible to live alone, Miss Holt. I don't know how I am to put up with it. I lie awake for hours before it is time to get up wondering how I am to get through the day. You see, I am very strong and active, and I can get through a lot of hard work in a short time, and Jane's a handy, industrious girl, and between us we soon do all there is to be done. Jane sits down to her seam in the afternoon, and I do a bit of gardening or take a walk; but there's a long evening to get through after that."

"But you could read," returned Ranee eagerly. "We have some nice books, Vera and I, and I am sure we shall be pleased to lend you some." But Hannah shook her head a little sadly.

"I was never much of a reader," she observed regretfully; "but thank you all the same for your kindly offer. There is a deal in one's upbringing, Miss Holt," looking full at Vera as she spoke. Somehow those honest grey eyes seemed to appeal so forcibly to the girl that her manner grew less stiff and constrained. Miss Burke certainly interested her; she seemed to be a most respectable and well-behaved person, and there could be no harm in showing her a little neighbourly attention, for the fragrant tea and the cream and the cake were not without their mollifying influence. "As I was saying," continued Hannah simply, "one's early life and upbringing have a deal to do with one's tastes and habits. You see, I come of working people, my dear young ladies, as I daresay you know, for people talk about their neighbours in Abbey-Thorpe. Not that I am ashamed of owning that my mother was a factory girl when father married her, and that she thought, dear soul, that it was a grand rise in the world to marry a master carpenter."

Vera and Ranee exchanged glances. They had known all this before, but somehow the bald facts seemed softened as Hannah narrated them; her simplicity and good sense seemed to invest them with a new dignity. There was even a shade of deference in Vera's tone as she answered:

"Yes, we knew that; unfortunately there is so much gossip in Abbey-Thorpe."

"I think there are busybodies all the world over," returned Hannah Burke, with a faint smile. "Not that they trouble me. Providence gave me good parents, and if father had not failed in business he would not have died in his prime with a sore heart; but he was a proud man, and he could not brook being servant where he had been

master, it fairly shamed him, and he lost heart and courage. But there, I won't talk of those old miserable days; we all have to pass through the cloud at some time in our lives before we reach the sunshine."

"Do go on—we are really very much interested; are we not, Vera?" But Ranee seemed satisfied by the expression of her sister's face; the girls were too honest and true-hearted not to recognize the absolute sincerity of the speaker.

"I don't want to weary you by talking of myself," went on Hannah; "I only meant to make it clear to you why I am not much of a reader now. Ours was a working household, and books, except the Bible and *Pilgrim's Progress* and Baxter's *Rest*, and such like, were seldom in our hands. Father liked a bit of reading on a Sunday afternoon, and so did mother, but they often fell asleep before a page was turned. I was always rather fond of a story when it came my way, but I had too much to do ever to go in search of it. When there is washing and baking and mending and making, and an invalid in the chimney-corner, the day is none so long. I mean," correcting herself in a painstaking manner that struck her hearers, "the day never seemed long enough. I had no need to lie awake then to think how I was to get through the time," with a patient smile that was very pathetic and sad.

"Ah, but you can read now?" returned Ranee, who was very persistent. "There is nothing like books when one is lonely. Have you ever read *John Halifax, Gentleman?*" Then, as Hannah shook her head, "Well, I have a lovely copy. Peter—I mean, my brother—gave it me years ago at Christmas. It is such a favourite book, and we all love it. I always wanted to hug the authoress for

being such a dear as to write it. It is about a poor ragged boy—only he is the son of a gentleman—and he is such a fine fellow and leads such a beautiful life," and here Ranee was forced to take breath.

"I should like to read it—will you lend it to me? You are very, very kind;" and Hannah looked at her gratefully.

"I will bring it myself to-morrow," returned Ranee cheerfully. "Well, what is it, Vera?" for her sister was making signs to her.

"It means we must go," replied Vera promptly. "Ray, do look at the clock. We have been here nearly two hours."

"The time has seemed just nothing," returned Miss Burke. "You have given me a deal of pleasure, my dear young ladies, and I am very grateful to you. You will come again and see me?" looking at Ranee rather wistfully.

"Of course we shall come, and I hope—that is, we expect you will return our visit;" and Vera felt herself obliged to endorse her sister's speech.

"We are generally at home about tea-time," she observed civilly. But possibly Hannah missed some warmth in her tone, for she only smiled and thanked her, and then they took their leave.

They were nearly at the gate when Ranee suddenly remembered something and ran back to the porch, where Hannah was still standing.

"Oh, Miss Burke," she said breathlessly, "I quite forgot to ask you if your servant will be back to-night. You will surely not be alone in the house?"

"The idea of your troubling yourself about that!" returned Hannah gratefully. "No, indeed, Miss Holt.

Jane's coming back by the last train; she would not hear of stopping for the night. She is a good girl, is Jane. Not that I would have minded," continued Hannah; "I have no fears of that sort. When one has a good conscience and believes in guardian angels there is no need to be frightened of bogies. As far as that goes, I would as lief be in an empty house as a full one. It is only the companionship I miss." And then again they shook hands, and Ranee rejoined her sister.

"I really like her," she began in her eager manner; "I think she is a good woman, Vera. Oh, dear, can that possibly be Peter coming out of Denham Lodge? I am afraid old Mr. Gregory must have had another attack. Oh, yes, he sees us, and he is crossing the road. Right about, face—march!" she continued playfully, and then she touched her hat and saluted as their commanding officer approached.

Peter beamed at them. "Bless you, my children!" he observed as he tucked a girl under each arm and walked off with them. And it was a happy and contented trio who fell into step and marched down Colnbrook Road, for Peter was pleased with his sisters and all was well.

Chapter V

A STRANGE LADY BOWS TO PETER

Let's find the sunny side of men
Or be believers in it;
A light there is in every soul
That takes the pains to win it.

ANON.

If you present to the world a broad, sympathetic nature, you will have friends, whether rich or poor.—MARDEN.

As soon as they left the comparative retirement of Colnbrook Road, Peter dropped the girls' arms and assumed what he called his professional deportment, and Vera and Ranee walked sedately beside him. Vera made her request in rather a timid and deprecating manner. It was such a fine evening, she remarked, that she and Ranee meant to walk in the Abbey meadows after tea—at least after Peter's tea, for they had fared sumptuously at Wayside—and would he come with them just for a time?

To be sure he would. Peter was in a benign and gracious mood that evening. No, there was no need to go home first; he had had tea at Denham Lodge—Mrs. Gregory had insisted on it. They might take him where they liked, only he wanted to know first how they had got on with Miss Burke. "One at a time, and no steeplechasing, remember," he finished judicially. For the girls were apt to tell their little adventures at racing speed, each trying to get ahead of the other. Even Sallie would interrupt at

a critical moment, and by a short cut clear the conversational course at a canter.

"You tell him, Vera."

"No—you, Ranee!" And Ranee, nothing loath, plunged into her story. She was rather good at description, and never missed a striking point. Hannah's tall figure in the bib-apron, as she carried the tea-tray, the cosy corner, the Crown Derby cups and saucers, the hot cake, and Tabby and her kittens—she made it all visible to her auditor. "I never saw such a sweet old room in my life!" she exclaimed rapturously. "We both fell in love with it; did we not, Vera?"

"Wayside is a tidy little crib," returned Peter complacently. "It just suited old Mrs. Wallace. She was such a pretty old lady—like a bit of Dresden china herself. I believe when she was younger she played on the harp. She looked quite a picture in her black satin and lace caps and fal-lals—what do you call them?—ruffles over her hands. I never saw an old lady do herself better."

"It is such a pity when people do not suit their environment," observed Vera in a patronizing tone. "Somehow Miss Burke seems so out of it all. She looks as though it could not possibly belong to her—as though she were only living there on sufferance."

"I know what you mean," returned Ranee eagerly; "I thought myself that she looked more like a superior caretaker than the mistress of the house. But we liked her," as Peter frowned at this, as though he considered them hypercritical. "She is certainly a good creature; but I do wish she would read more, her education seems so terribly neglected."

"My dear child, can you wonder at it?" a little impatiently. "Put yourself in her place. She has worked

hard all her life. She is only a carpenter's daughter, remember. A few years at a village school, and then at home slaving for her parents. Oh, you are extremely fond of reading, Ranee—I believe you sleep with a book under your pillow—but if you had to do all the cooking and the cleaning, and to make your own clothes and my shirts, too, with a poultry-yard and a garden to keep in order, you would not get through many books."

"No, I daresay not," returned Ranee, and she spoke with an air of conviction; "but she must have had more leisure at Wayside."

"I am not so sure of that," replied Peter. "I fancy Mrs. Wallace was a bit exacting, and got her pound of flesh in full measure. I know Miss Burke used to read the paper to her, for I often found her doing it; and she read rather nicely too, though I believe she was fond of skipping hard words. She is certainly not wanting in intelligence, you may take my word for that. I have heard her express herself most sensibly on more than one occasion, and she has evidently thought deeply on many subjects."

"Well, I considered herself rather interesting myself," observed Ranee candidly; "she is absolutely sincere. How old should you think she is, Peter?"

"Oh, I don't know," he returned carelessly; "about five-and-thirty, I expect. She may be younger, of course, only one never knows. Why don't you ask her, Ray? I am quite sure she would tell you." But Ranee passed this remark by in silence.

They were under the shadow of the Abbey by this time. The old walls and venerable tower stood out grandly in the soft evening light, the dull red tints of the Roman bricks clearly visible in the sunshine. Below lay the

Abbey meadows and the pleasant riverside walk leading to the village of Godstone and its ancient church, St. Vedast, with its picturesque churchyard.

This was a favourite walk with Ranee and her sisters; but still better they loved on a spring or summer evening to saunter through the wide green meadows to the Godstone wood. If Peter were with them he always made them linger a while at the white gate and observe how Watling Street crossed their walk. Never was there a spot more rich in association and interest to the antiquarian, as Peter well knew, and as they walked up the woodland road he was never weary of pointing out to his admiring sisters the remains of the Roman wall on one side, and the ancient British fosse on the other, widened and deepened as it was by the Roman builders. In private grounds close by wonderful remains had been found, treasure-troves of antiquity—bases of columns, tesselated pavements, and fragments of massive walls. Then crossing the sloping meadows, and passing through another gate, they would find themselves in St. Vedast's churchyard. This evening they chose the riverside walk that led to the main street of the village; and here, if Peter were in a didactic mood, he would remind his sisters how the whole of this site once formed the bed of a Roman lake, and subsequently a Saxon fishpool; and how, as an authority stated, " at a bend in the river, near a footbridge, a portion of the old lake may be seen in private grounds." And though the girls knew all this by heart, their interest never waned, and they would pause again and again of their own accord to look back at the vast massive length of the Abbey, with its plain unadorned façade and its ancient tower, the chief glory of the exterior. For, to quote the same contemporary authority, " the inordinate

length of the Abbey, the absence of flying buttresses, crocketed pinnacles, graceful spires, saint-filled niches, and dark mysterious angles renders it different to the majority of our English cathedrals." Nevertheless, plain and unornamental as it was, the Holt girls gloried in it. Had it not the longest Gothic nave in the world, and was it not the oldest of the great English churches now in existence? Even Sallie, so usually silent of tongue, would wax eloquent on that subject. For the girls loved every brick and stone of the old Abbey. From infancy they had grown up under its shadow, and while they were still lisping, toddling mites of children they had followed their mother, climbing painfully up the steps leading to the nave, and holding fast to her gown as they looked with wide, awe-struck eyes at the vast empty spaces. "Is it heaven, mummy?" Rance had once asked. "Baby Ra don't like it; wants to go home"; for that interminable nave and the long aisles filled her infant mind with a sense of appalling desolation. But as she grew older the Abbey became every year dearer and more fascinating. Vera and Sallie felt the same. When Peter did not need them, and the day's work was done—for they were industrious young creatures and seldom wasted their time—they would often go, either singly or together, down to the Abbey for evensong in the Lady Chapel. Perhaps Ranee went oftenest; she always said the short service was such a nice finish to the day. "I don't know why," she would remark, "but I always enjoy my evening more when I have been to the Abbey." There was no thought of evensong on this occasion, for Peter was with them; besides, as Vera observed, "the service must be half over by this time." But a fresh subject of interest occurred to them as they entered Church Street, with its bridge and clear

shallow pool, with a cart and horse as usual in the middle of it.

"What a jolly old street this is!" Peter had remarked for about the hundredth time in his life, when an unusually smart victoria and pair drove rapidly past. Its only occupant was a well-dressed, rather young-looking woman. She had a dark piquante face, and to the girls' surprise bowed graciously to Peter, who reddened slightly as he raised his hat in response to this greeting.

"Who is she?" they both asked in a breath; and Ranee added, "We have never seen her—and she smiled in such a friendly manner as she bowed."

"Yes, it was awfully decent of her." Peter spoke in a gratified tone. "I only saw her for an instant at Wynyards. Dr. Weston introduced me, I believe; only I never expected her to recognise me. She is a howling swell, you know."

"But her name—you have not told us that," returned Ranee, feeling inclined to shake him. Peter never could be induced to hurry himself. But on the present occasion he was quite willing to satisfy legititmate curiosity; besides his personal vanity was tickled by this remark of recognition.

"Oh, that was Mrs. Lugard," he returned complacently. "She is the sister of Sir Heber Maxwell, and has always lived with him since her husband's death. You know, we heard the other day from Margaret Weston that the family had returned to Godstone Park."

"Yes, but neither Vera nor I were much interested, for we have neither of us caught sight of Sir Heber," observed Ranee; "and I don't believe we knew of Mrs. Lugard's existence. She is a widow then, Peter?"

"I believe women who lose their husbands are gen-

all this and a good deal more was telegra
glance. Peter fairly chortled with joy as h
eyes translated the message. "Oh, gods and
mentally exclaimed Peter, "how tremendo
terranean and altogether ridiculous are t
woman!" Then he composed his features
"You are not keeping step, Ranee. Vera is
even walker; you want drilling a bit," with
frankness of a brother. Then Ranee, with a
patience, mended her pace.

"Don't be tiresome, Peter," she pleaded; "
hear a lot more about these people. I know
attends them—for Margaret told Vera—but
idea who was ill."

"Probably not," in a drier tone; for Peter
his easy temper, was a great stickler for
etiquette. "Ranee, my child, some one told m
day that Marshall and Snelgrove have an im
nection, and are making no end of a fortu
now how they achieved their success?"

"No," rather hesitatingly, for she thought

Ranee was more cork-like than Vera, and she was soon up again, and as lively as ever.

"I am so glad the family are back," she observed coolly. "I always thought it such a pity that Godstone Park should be empty so long—a beautiful place like that, too." Then did Peter fall into the trap.

"Well, you know Sir Heber only came into the property about fifteen months ago. His brother, Sir Ralph, could not live in England the last few years of his life; he was a terrible sufferer, I believe. Don't you remember we saw the notice of his death at Cannes?"

"Yes, but that was fifteen months ago," objected Ranee, "and it seems so strange to stay away all that time."

"How do you know Sir Heber stayed away?" returned Peter. "I have reason to believe that he was often at the Park, though people did not know it. He is a bit of a hermit, they say. I have an idea that I came across him myself—more than once."

"Not really, Peter? Do tell us what he is like." But Peter seemed unable to give any lucid description.

"A short dark man," he remarked vaguely. "No, not like his sister—not so good-looking; rather ordinary, in fact, and quite shabbily dressed—not the least like a wealthy baronet," finished Peter decidedly. "To tell you the truth," reserving his most cutting speech to the last, "I thought he was the butler out for a holiday."

"Peter!" aghast, and Ranee looked disgusted. She had all kinds of romantic ideas connected with baronets in general, and this one in particular.

He was the great man of the neighbourhood—he was rolling in money. The Maxwells of Godstone Park were very big people indeed; "howling swells" as Peter had

expressed it. There were monuments and brasses in St. Vedast's sacred to the memory of dead and gone Maxwells. One had been a Crusader, and had left his bones in the Holy Land—plain Ralph Maxwell he was; and there was another, a Cluny Maxwell, who fell at Agincourt. The family was a proud one, and the first baronet—his name was Alexander—accepted the title rather reluctantly. "Alexander Maxwell, gentleman, is good enough for me," he said to his wife; but Dame Helena, who came of a rich City family, yearned to be called my lady, and her imperious will carried the day.

The Holt girls had felt quite a flutter of excitement when Margaret Weston had told them that the family were settled at the Park, and that her father had been summoned. Margaret could give them no further information, and Peter was ruthlessly destroying their illusion—a short dark man who looked like a butler out for a holiday was scrarcely attractive enough for any decent hero. Then a ray of light shone on the darkness—perhaps he was the butler; but Peter shook his head at the suggestion.

"He was nothing of the kind. I saw one of the keepers touch his cap to him, and some women at the lodge gave a deep curtsy. It was Sir Heber right enough; no one will fall in love with him for his beauty, I can tell you that."

Peter seemed to take a savage delight in trampling on Ranee's harmless little illusions.

Ranee was silenced, but Vera wanted to hear more. She had been rather struck with the stylish and vivacious little lady in the victoria. Abbey-Thorpe had never seen a smarter turn-out.

"It must be nice for Sir Heber to have his sister living

with him," she observed quietly. "I think Margaret said he was not married?"

"Oh no, he is not married."

"Mrs. Lugard must have been a widow some time, for she was not in mourning."

"Indeed?" Peter was beginning to look bored.

"I wonder if she has any children?"

"A little girl, I believe. There, haven't we talked enough about our neighbours? I want to enjoy my walk in peace without being put through all this catechism. Halloo, there is old Martin sunning himself on a tombstone, as usual. I must ask him how his rheumatism is," and he unlatched the church-yard gate.

The girls followed him willingly enough. Old Sam Martin was a favourite with them; his brown, weather-beaten face looked like a ripe russet apple, and there was a child-like expression in his blue eyes that always appealed to them. He lived with a married daughter and her husband at the lodge.

"How is the enemy, Martin?" asked Peter, sitting down beside the old man. "I wish other people nearly fourscore could look as hale and hearty."

"That's true, Doctor, and thank the Lord for his mercies," returned Martin piously. "But as for the rheumatics, they are cruel bad; the pain gets into my old bones of a night. Dr. Weston gave me some of his good stuff when he was up at the House on Friday." Then Martin's voice became more animated. "You know we've got the Master back, and he has brought the young Madam with him. I can't call to mind her married name. Miss Damaris we used to call her in the old days. Why, she looks young still; but it is a sore pity that her only child should be such a crooked, sickly little body."

Peter nodded assent to this, and old Martin, who had grown garrulous with age, rambled on with much enjoyment.

"Jenny tells me—Jenny is my daughter, Doctor, and a better daughter never lived—she was saying to Gavin and me the other night that it was a pity Miss Damaris married a man so much older than herself, for she has got a step-son nearly her own age—a fine young man they say he is, and the best of friends with his step-mother. I expect there will be rare doings up at the House, for, as Jenny says, she was always a lively piece of goods was Miss Damaris. What, must you be going, Doctor. Well, thank you kindly"—as a silver coin changed hands.

"Damaris—what a singular name," observed Vera, "but it is rather quaint and pretty," and Ranee agreed to this. But it was so evident that Peter wanted to change the subject, that nothing more was said about the new owner of Godstone Hall and his sister; and during the remainder of the walk they were laughing and joking with Peter about some alterations he had planned in the kitchen garden.

Chapter VI

A WAYSIDE MISSION

Converse with a mind that is grandly simple and literature looks like word-catching. The simplest utterances are worthiest to be written, yet are they so cheap, and so things of course, that in the infinite riches of the soul, it is like gathering a few pebbles off the ground or bottling a little air in a phial, when the whole earth and atmosphere are ours.—EMERSON.

RANEE had not forgotten her promise to lend Hannah Burke her own copy of *John Halifax, Gentleman,* and the following afternoon she left the book at the door. Vera had advised her not to go in. "It would never do to call two days running," she had observed, and Ranee agreed to this. But she rather regretted acting on this advice when Jane pressed her civilly to come in. "My mistress is all alone, and would be glad to see you," she had added.

As she went down the trim little path she caught a glimpse of Hannah Burke's pale face at the window.

"I think she was on the watch for me," she observed to Sallie, who was waiting for her outside, "and I was longing to have another look at that dear old room; but I knew Vera would not have approved. I felt rather mean as I closed the gate."

Vera's gentleness and tact gave her great influence with her sisters, and Ranee often refrained from some impulsive action from an innate consciousness that Vera would be shocked. Even Peter, though he often called her play-

Margaret was well aware that, to all his sisters, and though he fact, it was Ranee for whom he h "She is such a plucky soul, and her," he said once. "But there, girls!" he exclaimed hastily, as unusual demonstrativeness.

Peter always maintained stoutly odious and bred discord in families was Sallie who was most indulgec less there was a secret corner in P only Ranee filled, and it dated fro Ra had bundled after her big broth a sitting posture in a vain attempt red shoes. "Ooh, Pete dear, Bab "Oh, Baby hurted herself!" And had gathered a wailing little heap o his arms. "Don't cry, kiddy, I ride"; and then there were might ings in the passage outside the nur

side Miss Burke. Hannah smiled at her, but did not speak until they were outside. Her first speech was a little abrupt.

"Why did you not come in the other afternoon, Miss Holt? I had been expecting you, and was so disappointed."

"I am very sorry," returned Ranee, rather embarrassed by this; "but my youngest sister was waiting for me. I had no idea you would expect me so soon again." And then changing the subject hurriedly, "I don't think I have ever seen you here before?"

"I daresay not," returned Hannah quietly; "week-day services have not been in my line, Miss Holt. To tell you the truth, I had just put on my hat to take a stroll in the Abbey meadows because the evening was so fine; and then, as I was passing the Deanery, I heard the bell and I had a sort of fancy to go in. I am glad I went," she finished simply; "it was very comforting and soothing, and it has rested me somehow."

"Oh, I always love coming, it does one no end of good," returned Ranee. "Would you like to take a turn by the river now? I was just going there myself. My sisters promised to join me if they finished their work in time."

Ranee spoke out of pure good-nature, for she thought Hannah looked tired and depressed. She was surprised to see how she brightened up in quick response to this trivial kindness.

"Oh, I should love it," she replied; "it will be quite a treat to have a companion for my walk." And then as they passed through the gate leading to the meadow, she continued, "I have been wanting to thank you for the pleasure you have given me. I have nearly finished the

book, and I think I have never read anything so beautiful."

"Oh, I am so glad to hear you say that!" Ranee was delighted at this evident appreciation of her old favourite.

"John and Ursula seem just like living friends to me," went on Hannah; "I do so love reading about good people. But I nearly cried my eyes out over little Muriel's death. I was quite ashamed that Jane should see me when she came in with the supper-tray. You will laugh at me, Miss Holt, but I feel as though I could not bring myself to part with the book, and I have made up my mind to go down to Hayter's in Market Street and get the best copy I can find. It will be the first book I have bought for many a long year, but I doubt if it will be the last. I have not quite got used to the notion that I can lay out money on myself; it seems sort of—it seems strange to me at first."

"Oh, you will soon find spending money a very pleasant amusement," returned Ranee, smiling at Hannah's frankness; and then, as they strolled down the long path by the ruins, they discussed the story with a good deal of animation; and as the girl listened to Miss Burke's shrewd and intelligent remarks, she owned that Peter was right, and that Hannah was a keen observer in her quiet way.

Ranee grew more interested every moment, and her manner became more unrestrained and natural, and before long she found herself talking to her new acquaintance with almost the same freedom that marked her intercourse with Margaret Weston. There was something fresh and stimulating in Hannah's childlike simplicity; it was like turning over virgin soil and coming upon rare plants, self-sowed, in out-of-the-way corners. She might express

herself in homely language, but she was certainly an intelligent and thoughtful woman.

"I have heaps of nice books that I can lend you, if you won't mind shabby covers," observed Ranee, as they seated themselves where they could watch some ducks dabbling in the stream. I should like you to read all my old favourites. Let me see, there is *The Heir of Redcliffe*, and *The Daisy Chain*—oh, certainly *The Daisy Chain*—and *Two Years Ago*, and *Pride and Prejudice*, and *Emma*, and *Little Lord Fauntleroy*, and *The Story of a Short Life*, and——"

"Don't tell me any more unless you want to make me giddy," laughed Hannah. Her grey eyes looked large and bright with excitement.

"Miss Burke is quite nice-looking when she laughs," observed Ranee to her sister afterwards; "she has such beautiful white teeth, and there is something so frank and pleasant in her smile." But Vera listened to this in silence. It was not that she was unsympathetic, but she knew by past experience how impulsive Ranee was. "She gets just crazy over people who interest her," she confided to Sallie, "and then when they disappoint her she is as angry as possible. Ray never will believe that 'all is not gold that glitters,'" continued the anxious elder sister, "and if we are not careful, Sallie, she will have a fit of Burke fever." But Sallie only shrugged her shoulders at at these words of wisdom.

"I think I shall devote my evenings to reading," observed Hannah presently, "I want to make up for lost time—if you will only give me a helping hand, Miss Holt; for I am that ignorant that I don't know what I ought to read." Here she hesitatel. "There was some book the doctor once recommended—about a Bush, I think it was

—but I don't remember the title; he said there was a doctor in it that would put them all to shame."

"Oh, I know!" exclaimed Ranee eagerly. "*Beside the Bonnie Brier Bush,* by Ian Maclaren. Yes, that is a great favourite of Peter's. I am quite sure he will lend it to you."

"Thank you, but there is no need to trouble the Doctor," returned Hannah a little stiffly. "I have heard there is a good lending library at Hayter's, so I will just ask for *The Bonnie Brier Bush* when I next go down Market Street. Oh, there are your sisters crossing the meadow, Miss Holt, and you will be wanting to join them." But Ranee had no intention of moving; she waited until Vera and Sallie approached them.

Vera showed no surprise when she saw Miss Burke. "Every one seems out this lovely evening," she observed, as she shook hands with her. "I suppose you have just met?" But she looked a little taken aback when they both disclaimed this. "We met in the Abbey after service," remarked Ranee rather curtly. But Hannah enlarged on the fact.

"Your sister was good enough to ask me to walk with her," she returned. She looked so animated and bright that Vera quite stared at her. "I should think we have been talking for nearly an hour—all about books, too. Why," with a childlike laugh, "I shall hardly know myself in a month or two's time—I shall be growing such a bookworm."

"Ranee is very fond of reading," returned Vera a little coldly. "Ray, dear, I don't want to hurry you, but it is growing so late, and Peter will be wondering what has become of us. Would you like us to go on first, and then you can follow?" But Ranee would not hear of this. She

had been more than an hour in Hannah Burke's company, and it must be nearly time for their early supper. The idea that Peter should be kept waiting brought her to her feet.

"We will all go together," she returned; "it will be far more sociable. We will see you to your door, Miss Burke; it is hardly a yard out of the way. And Vera could do no less than endorse this. Before they parted she expressed a civil hope that they would see Miss Burke soon; but, strange to say, Hannah did not respond as cordially as Ranee expected.

"Thank you, Miss Holt, you are very kind," was all her answer. But as she grasped Ranee's hand she said in a low voice, very meaningly, "I hope you will come in next time; doors are never meant to shut on one's friends"; and there was a warm, yearning look in Hannah's eyes that touched Ranee.

As the three girls walked quickly down Colnbrook Street, Sallie asked rather curiously what Miss Burke had said. Ranee repeated her words, and then with her usual eagerness she unfolded her little plan for Hannah's edification.

"I shall lend her books and try to form her mind," she said, with a touch of brisk importance in her voice that amused them both. "She has plenty of intelligence, but it has never been cultivated. I shall choose simple books at first, until she has acquired a taste for reading, and perhaps she will be able to assimilate more solid literature. She really is very clever in her way—one or two of her remarks quite surprised me."

"Oh, I always said she was a very sensible young woman," returned Vera. She did not mean to be damping, but she was secretly afraid of her sister's impulsive-

ness. "It is a very kind thought on your part, Ray, but if you start a lending library on your own account, won't it lead to greater intimacy than we consider desirable?" But Ranee would not allow this.

"She was not accustomed to measure the limits of a new acquaintanceship," she observed with dignity, "or to erect imaginary breakwaters for fear the tide of affection should carry her off her feet. She hated that sort of thing"—a little crossly.

"If we are to love our neighbours as ourselves," continued the girl, "we ought surely to do them good in every way that we can; and you ought not to throw cold water on my plan;" and Ranee's hurt tone brought Vera figuratively to her knees.

"Oh, Ray dear, I did not mean to be horrid," she returned sweetly. "I only thought that you would always be running in and out of Wayside, and I was a little afraid of that." But Ranee had mounted her stilts, as Margaret expressed it, and did not intend to descend just yet. She had not forgotten the look in Hannah's eyes.

"There spoke Miss Propriety!" with a little toss of her head. These little breezes were not uncommon between the sisters, but they quickly blew over, and served to clear the air. "But with all my impulsiveness," continued Ranee, "I am not devoid of common-sense. I shall make up a nice little parcel of books in a day or two, and take them myself; and Sallie can come with me if she likes, for I shall certainly go in. And I am going to ask Peter to lend Miss Burke his copy of *Beside the Bonnie Brier Bush*, for she does so want to read that."

"I would not do that if I were you, Ray." If Vera had died for it, she could not have held her tongue. If Ranee chose to be absurd, and to cultivate an undesirable ac-

quaintanceship, no one could prevent her, but why bring Peter in?

"It was Peter who recommended the book to Miss Burke," returned Ranee impatiently. "My dear Vera, when you are in this mood you are a perfect weariness to the flesh and spirit; for a real worriment—'spell it with a v, my lord, spell it with a v.'" And lo and behold, as Ranee made this atrocious joke, the mantle of her dignity fell from her and she kicked away the stilts with a merry laugh.

"Oh, don't let us quarrel over a red-haired Burke," she observed gaily, and Vera gave her arm a grateful little squeeze in return for this forbearance. It was then that Sallie somewhat solemnly took up the parable.

"It is not really red, Ranee. Miss Burke's hair, in my opinion, is quite beautiful; it is copper-coloured, with reddish lights." But they both let this pass, for Sallie, being an embryo artist, was an authority on colour.

It was a perfect harmonious trio that entered the Red House. Peter was engaged with a patient in the study, so there unpunctuality escaped comment. It was not until supper was nearly over that Ranee made her modest request. Peter looked rather pleased.

"Fancy Miss Burke remembering that!" he exclaimed. "I had forgotten that I ever mentioned the book to her." But when the meal was over he went himself in search of the volume.

"I think Barrie's books would suit her," he observed, as he handed it to Ranee, who was already making up her little parcel. "The dry, solemn Scotch humour would appeal to her, I know. What are you observing, little 'un?" as Ranee looked dubious and muttered something about a dictionary or glossary of words being needed.

...s and charming, no doubt.
a school-girl; a woman of her
Miss Austen—humph—that was
Emma himself, and Kingsley ha

Ranee listened to these remai
ness, but Vera noticed that *The E*
returned to the book-case; when
was popped into the parcel and s
Emma and *The Story of a Short*

"It really must go," she obse
Burke will just love it"—and it w

Vera with much tact refrained
mark. When, two days later, Ran
Wayside with the parcel of books
afternoon with much satisfaction t
surprised when Peter and the tea
neously.

"Where are the other girls?"
opened his *Graphic* and Vera peep
the pictures. But when she exp
looked both surprised and pleased

and awkward in these sort of things and needs encouragement. Why not send her a note and fix some afternoon? That will make things pleasanter for her. Thursday, if that will suit you." Peter was carrying things with a high hand as usual. "Have you any engagement for Thursday?"

"No, I think not." Vera was vainly cudgelling her brains for some legitimate excuse. "But I thought you were going to Hartley on that day?"

"Well, so I am," a little quickly. "I never meant to be included in your tea-party. You will get on better without me, I should say. Why not ask Margaret Weston?"

But Vera hastily negatived this. "They had better have Miss Burke alone, if Peter really wished it. She would write a note after tea, and Ebenezer could leave it at Wayside on his way home." Vera felt, if the thing had to be done, she had better do it with a good grace, and Peter's look of approval was her reward.

There was no time to say any more, for at that moment the truants returned in high spirits. They had had quite a delightful afternoon. Miss Burke had taken them all over the house, and had shown them all her treasures—wonderful specimens of needlework, a silk quilt that was nearly a hundred years old, and some samplers and curtains that were marvellously worked by Mrs. Wallace's grandmother."

"Sallie nearly lost her head with excitement," went on Ranee. "She told Miss Burke that she had never seen such beautiful things in her life before—you did, didn't you, Sal? We could hardly drag her away from the oak chest when tea was ready. Miss Burke was so amused. And we had such delicious seed-cake—just what you

would have liked, Vera; and Sallie and I each had a ten in our laps all tea-time. We have christened tl Tweedledum and Tweedledee, because they are so a that you can't tell either from which; and even Ta doesn't know them apart. And, Vera dear," afte breathless pause, " Sallie agrees with me that we re ought to ask Miss Burke to tea. Eh, what?' looking fi one to the other—" there is some mystery here."

" Oh, dear, no, not at all," returned Vera demur " Peter has just suggested the same thing, and I am gc to write a note and ask Miss Burke for Thursday. ' have no engagement for that afternoon, have you, Ra But of course she knew Ranee's answer beforehand, the note was written and dispatched in due course.

Chapter VII

"THAT EVENTFUL THURSDAY": MID-DAY

It is a great thing to have brotherly help in life. We all need each other. Not one of us could get on without others to share his burdens.—Rev. J. R. Miller.

It is one thing to make a plan, but in this world one cannot be certain of carrying it out; for, as Burns has it, "the best-laid schemes o' mice and men gang aft a-gley," and after all Peter did not go to Hartley that Thursday—"that eventful Thursday," as Ranee called it afterwards. If only Dr. Weston had not had an attack of gout on Wednesday evening, how different things might have turned out. If only—but why anticipate? Was it not written in the annals of the Red House that Peter should be disappointed of his visit to Hartley?

Peter had been looking forward to his afternoon with much pleasure. He had arranged to cycle over to that charming little village and spend an hour or two with his friend, the Reverend Howard Courteney, and his pretty wife, and had congratulated himself the previous evening on the prospect of a fine day. To be sure, he had added by way of postscript to his letter, "I shall turn up all right if nothing prevent." He always put this, as more piously-disposed people write D.V. It is the correct thing, and makes them more comfortable. But, confound it—oh, fie, Peter!—something had turned up with a vengeance!

Dr. Weston was one of the most abstemious and temperate of men, nevertheless at intervals—happily like angels' visits few and far between—the old hereditary enemy of his race had him in his grip; the hard-working, self-denying physician had to suffer for his sinful self-indulgence of his forbears. On these occasions Margaret devoted herself to the sufferer with absolute devotion, and between his twinges of pain Dr. Weston would have his little joke with her, and declare that she enjoyed playing the part of nurse.

"It is an ill wind that blows no one any good," and these periodical attacks of gout furnished Peter with many a windfall. He had to undertake the duties of *locum tenens*, and see all Dr. Weston's patients in addition to his own. And as, in spite of his remonstrances, Dr. Weston always insisted on repaying him most liberally for his time and services, the household at the Red House were largely benefited.

Peter would argue the matter quite hotly with his old friend sometimes. "You know I should be too happy to do anything in my power to help you, Dr. Weston; there ought to be no question of payment between us for a few days' work. It is not as though I have so many patients of my own that I cannot easily spare the time," continued the young man with a flush, for his small practice gave Peter many a moment of humiliation.

"My dear fellow, we know all this," returned Dr. Weston, with a kind look at his young confrère, "but let an old friend have his way." And as Peter knew of the old doctor's obstinacy, there was no use saying any more.

On this occasion he took the visiting list silently, and made no objection when Dr. Weston desired him to use his carriage. His bicycle would have done just as well.

Peter knew that Dr. Weston's patients were used to seeing their physician drive up in a carriage and pair. Ranee and Vera, who were walking down the High Street, had a thrilling moment when the brougham passed them, and they caught sight of a fair head inside. Peter was reading his paper, and did not see them.

"Didn't he look nice," observed Vera admiringly, "just as though it were his own carriage. Oh, Ray, I do so wish he could get on quicker, and then he could have a nice little brougham of his own. People would think so much more of him, and cycling makes him so hot."

This was a long standing wish on Vera's part, and Ranee sighed as though she echoed it, but she brightened up the next minute.

"Rome was not built in a day, Vera, and it takes time to make a practice. Peter had a new patient last week, you must not forget that. Oh, I know what you are going to say, you tiresome thing, that one swallow does not make summer, but all the same it shows the other swallows are on their way. Peter is so clever that he is bound to get on, if only we are not impatient."

"I try not to be," returned Vera a little sadly; "but if you knew how hard it is to make ends meet"; for poor Vera being housekeeper and general manager, the keeping of accounts was within her province. And having a clear head, and being rather fond of figures, she often helped Peter too; in fact, a good share of the household responsibility lay on her shoulders. "Ray dear, I don't want to worry you, but I am afraid we shall have to pay a little more to the housekeeping expenses this month. I have been as economical as possible, but you know, as Judith says, we have all such good appetites, and mutton is a half-penny a pound dearer."

This was disturbing, and Vera's worried look was reflected on Ranee's face. "Do you mean that we shall have to draw out from the Emergency Fund? Oh dear, oh dear," for this was such excessively bad news that Ranee was loath to believe her ears. Vera was no alarmist, and never made a statement that she could not endorse —things must have come to a pretty pass if the Emergency Fund was to be touched.

"We need not take much," returned Vera gently, "two or three pounds will put things right; but I don't like to ask Peter to make up the deficit, because I know he is hard up this month. I daresay things will right themselves after a time. I am as sorry as I can be for dear Dr. Weston's illness, but of course I know what it means to Peter."

Ranee nodded. Of course she understood what Vera meant. The next moment her thoughts travelled back to the brougham, and Peter inside it reading the paper, and reposing luxuriously against the padded cushions.

"It has often crossed my mind," she observed seriously, as she entered St. Andrew's Street, "that perhaps some day Dr. Weston will take Peter into partnership— not for some years probably, but when he is older, and if the gout gets more troublesome. Of course we must not build on it, but really it seems such a probable thing to happen." And there is no doubt that Vera would have agreed with this, only at that moment she was troubled by a most disquieting reflection. Margaret's letter had obliged Peter to hurry over his breakfast that morning: there was a telegram to be sent to Hartley Vicarage, and some orders to be given to Ebenezer. And in the bustle she had forgotten that Miss Burke was coming to tea that very afternoon. How provoking it all was, and just

after she had been obliged to trouble Ranee about the Emergency Fund. But there was no help for it, she must confess her culpable carelessness, and listen to Ranee's horrified exclamations. No hot cakes, or scones ordered. Judith unusually busy, scarcely a square inch of the plum-cake left—cakes being speedily demolished at the Red House.

"Oh dear, is nothing going right to-day!" exclaimed Ranee in a voice of such despair that Vera felt something must be done to console her.

A few blank moments of perplexity, then the young housekeeper's face cleared. She had an inspiration.

"Don't you worry yourself, Ray," she said cheerfully, "I think I can manage things all right." But Ranee depressed by this second misfortune, could not be consoled by this vague assurance. She looked at Vera suspiciously. "I don't know what you mean," she returned impatiently; "We haven't the widow's barrel of meal, so I don't see how you are going to conjure up a lot of nice things. I suppose we must just give her thin bread and butter and hot toast; but it does seem so mean after that beautiful tea at Wayside. Oh, there is nothing to laugh about," still more aggrieved by Vera's obstinate cheerfulness. Then a sudden thought struck her: "Vera, remember I won't have the Fund touched for this purpose—nothing would induce me." Then Vera laughed again.

"My dear child, what put such an absurd thought in your head? As though I would spend any of that precious money on cakes for Miss Burke!" a contemptuous emphasis on the last words. "I am not quite such a goose. You just leave things to me: too many cooks spoil the broth, and one housekeeper is enough in a house." And Vera looked so pretty and determined and

good-natured that Ranee felt her discontent gradually oozing away.

Ranee and Sallie occupied the large back room over the drawing-room that had been their mother's room. Vera and Peter slept in the front of the house. Vera's room was very small, but she preferred it to a larger and more commodious one upstairs. "It is so nice for us all to be on one floor," she would say, if any of her friends expressed surprise at her limited accommodation, "and I do so hate a sloping roof. It is not as though I had a large wardrobe," she continued with a laugh, "and Mother Hubbard, as Ranee sometimes calls me, is quite happy in her cupboard." And indeed Vera's room might have belonged to the fairy order, it was so neat and spotless. Ranee and Sallie were less methodical in their arrangements, and first one and then another would be seized by a sudden desire to turn out drawers and cupboard, and have a general clearance. It was Sallie who was chiefly addicted to these periodical attacks of activity—"tidy fits," as Ranee called them. They said afterwards how extremely odd it was that Sallie should be seized with one of these tidy fits on this eventful Thursday; but sure enough as Ranee opened the door there was Sallie with her head tied up in a clean duster, and one of Judith's aprons enveloping her girlish figure, turning out the contents of a big cupboard and rearranging the shelves. This was so interesting that Ranee sat down and watched her. It was a point of honour not to offer to help. "The people only muddle things," Sallie would say.

"I wonder what put it into your head to have a clearance?" asked Ranee lazily. "How dusty those boxes are, Sal."

"It came into my head at breakfast time," retu

Sallie energetically. "Open the window a little wider, Ray, and then you won't be smothered. I did the drawers last week, and I knew the cupboard was in a disgraceful state. If you have nothing to do you might ask Vera for some clean toilets; and I do think," in rather an injured tone, "that it is time that we had clean quilts."

Ranee hesitated. "I think Vera is busy. I expect she is going to make some Paris buns for tea because Judith is busy." And then, as Sallie worked on busily she poured out her troubles—the necessity of drawing out of the Emergency Fund, and Vera's extraordinary forgetfulness of their expected guest. Sallie's face grew rather long as she listened. Her vision of clean toilets and quilts seemed vanishing; but the Fates were not so obdurate after all, for at this moment Vera put her head into the room. She still wore her hat, they remembered that afterwards, though that surprising fact did not strike them at the time. "It was a day of surprises," as they remarked. "First Dr. Webster's gout, and then"—but there is no use in anticipating, and the day was not very far advanced yet.

"Sallie, you deserve a gold medal," observed Vera approvingly. "That cupboard has been a perfect disgrace for ages. Oh dear, how could you let those boxes get so dusty? A damp cloth, not that dry duster." Vera's fingers were twitching with great eagerness to help.

"Don't come near or I'll smother you," returned Sallie pleasantly. "If you want to help, you may as well get us some clean quilts and toilets. We are not fit to be seen, are we, Ray?" And then Vera, who would probably have argued on the sinfulness of such extravagance on any other occasion, was so impressed by Sallie's activity that

she actually went off in search of the required articles, and then Ranee was invited to take off her hat and help.

"I have finished the worst part," went on Sallie. "I have scrubbed the shelves, and they are nearly dry, and I should like to put away some of the things by luncheon. I can easily finish afterwards." And then the two sisters worked with a will.

Peter was late for luncheon, but no one was surprised at that. The girls had finished their meal, and Sallie had fled to the upper regions before he made his appearance.

He gazed apprehensively at the table-cloth. Exquisitely darned as it was by Vera's fingers, it offered no attraction to Peter.

"Judith is keeping your luncheon hot; it will be here directly," observed Vera soothingly, and then for a few minutes she and Ranee were pleasantly engaged in ministering to their hero's wants. Peter took it all as a matter of course. He waited on his patients, and his sisters waited on him, and he would do as much for them any day, and that was all about it, and no need to squabble over it, and if all families were equally jolly, the world would be a pleasanter place in Peter's opinion.

"Well, Peter?" Ranee's patience was nearly exhausted. Of course he was hungry, poor fellow. He had worked so dreadfully hard all the morning. Still, by this time—— Then, as Peter lifted his silver tankard to his lips, he slowly winked.

"All right, little 'un, by and by—presently. Now, where's that cheese?"

Vera silently placed it before him, but Ranee was not to be repressed.

"Oh, Peter, we saw you just as we were passing the

Greyhound, but you never noticed us. We wanted you to bow to us, but you had your stupid paper."

"Well, it was rather stupid," assented Peter; "nothing in it at all. So you saw me, eh, bowling along High Street? Those horses of Weston's know how to go."

"Have you nearly finished your round?" asked Vera placidly. She had fetched her knitting; she knitted all her brother's socks, and never wasted a moment if she could help it.

"I have not done above half," was the complacent reply. "The brougham will be round as soon as Jenkins and the horses have fed. Dr. Weston has a lot of patients on hand. Some of them must be left for to-morrow. You see," emptying his tankard and setting it down with a satisfied look, "I have spent a good hour at Godstone Park."

"Peter!" a simultaneous exclamation from both the sisters. This was unexpected and wildly interesting.

"Dr. Weston had a message this morning. Mrs. Lugard's little girl was not well. Oh, I thought you would be pleased," looking at the two animated faces beside him. "You have so often said that you would like to see the inside of the house. Well, I had my chance this morning."

"Oh, Peter dear, do tell us all about it," pleaded Ranee; but he shook his head. He was sorely tempted, but he knew he must run over to the almshouse before the brougham came round. He had his afternoon's work cut out for him.

"Another time," was his answer; "this evening, if I am not too tired. It is a fine old place, though I prefer The Garth. I should hate living in such a big rambling house. But Mrs. Lugard's rooms seem uncommonly comfortable." Peter had risen, but he lingered for a

moment, detained by two pairs of longing, questioning eyes.

"My dear girls, you really must not keep me. We will have a palaver this evening."

"Only one question, Peter." Of course it was Ranee who spoke. "Is Mrs. Lugard nice?"

"Very nice, exceedingly nice." Peter's criticism was mellowed by an excellent luncheon kept perfectly hot. "She really is a charming little person, so chatty and agreeable, and not bad-looking either." And here Peter surveyed himself thoughtfully in the glass. "I think my hair wants cutting, girls, what do you say?"

"No, certainly not, unless you want to look like an escaped convict." Ranee spoke with energy; it was tiresome of him to change the subject. "Is the little girl like her mother, Peter?"

"Not in the least; I could never have believed them mother and daughter. Poor little soul, she has enough to bear."

"Margaret told us that she was deformed, poor mite," murmured Vera compassionately.

"Yes, but not badly—nothing unsightly, I mean." Peter was relaxing his strict professional rules for once. "A nurse dropped her when she was a year old, and there's curvature of the spine. She will get better by and by, I hope, but one never knows in these cases. The child seems devoted to her uncle; he was sitting with her when Mrs. Lugard took me up."

"Sir Heber, do you mean? Oh, do tell us——" but Ranee's exclamation was uttered to a closing door. Peter had fled.

Chapter VIII

"THAT EVENTFUL THURSDAY": EVENING

Gifts from the hand are silver and gold, but the heart gives that which neither silver nor gold can buy.—ANON.

The man of great self-control, the man who thinks a great deal and says little, who is self-centred, well-balanced, carries a thousand times more weight than the man of weak will, always wavering and undecided.—MARDEN.

PETER'S scraps of information furnished his sisters with conversation for the afternoon, and the news that he had actually been in Godstone Manor was a *bonne bouche* that lingered long and deliciously in their mental palate.

"He thought Mrs. Lugard charming—a marked emphasis on the last word! Evidently she had been nice to him. Perhaps, who knows, she might take some notice of Peter's sisters?" It was Ranee who hazarded this daring suggestion. Why should they not be asked to garden-parties and other public functions up at the Park? But though Vera smiled wistfully at the tempting idea, she thought it wiser to demolish it.

"Mrs. Lugard will have her own set," she observed. "It is not likely that she will have much to do with Abbey-Thorpe people. Besides," with a sigh, "we can't afford smart frocks, Ray." But Ranee refused to be damped.

"Oh, nonsense," she returned impatiently, "a white

frock or a pretty blouse would do quite well. I have made enough lace to trim the bodice of your Indian muslin. It will be smart enough for anything when it is finished, and you will look lovely in it. Now, it is no use saying anything"—as Vera attempted to protest—"I have been working for you all this time because you have not a decent frock for grand occasions. You know, Sallie and I have pretty new blouses. It is for your birthday present, and you will have to wear it;" and Ranee sat down to her lace pillow with fierce determination.

Vera gave her a grateful little kiss and made no further objection. The Indian muslin was a present from an old friend, and was not yet made up. That very morning Vera had peeped lovingly at it. "If only Ranee could have had one too," she thought regretfully. And now all those yards of exquisite lace were to embellish the soft daintiness. "It will be far too beautiful for me," she murmured gently, as she took up her unfinished mending.

They were still chattering blithely over their work when the expected guest arrived, ushered in by Sallie.

"I am afraid I am rather early," observed Hannah, a little nervously; but Vera politely reassured her on this point. And then the girls settled her comfortably in a corner of the big couch, and grouped themselves round her in a way that was very pleasant and sociable.

"You won't mind our going on with our work until tea comes," observed Vera, with gentle punctiliousness.

"No indeed, I like to see you working," returned Hannah cordially; "it looks so nice and homelike. Oh, what lovely lace!" with an admiring glance at Ranee's flying fingers. "Do you mean you have really made all those yards?"

"Yes, and they are for Vera's new dress," returned

Ranee proudly. And then Sallie suggested shyly that Miss Burke might like to see the Indian muslin. "It is so very pretty, and the lace looks so lovely on it, and it is quite as fine as those quaint old muslin dresses in the oak chest that belonged to Mrs. Wallace;" for both Ranee and Sallie had expatiated eloquently on the old-fashioned muslin robes, with their narrow frilled skirts and tiny high-waisted bodices, trimmed with real Mechlin lace. They were yellow with age now, and so were the strings of pearls that had once encircled a round girlish throat, and the long silk mittens were discoloured too, but with what tender reverence Hannah had touched them!

"That was her wedding gown," she had said, with a touch of awe in her voice. "She was married when she was sixteen. There is the lace spencer belonging to it, and that long veil was worn over her bonnet. It would look queer to us now, but people thought she looked beautiful."

Vera seemed rather startled by Sallie's undreamt-of proposition; but as Ranee eagerly seconded it, there was no help for it, and the dress was fetched. But Hannah was so interested and so full of appreciation, and had so many suggestions to offer, that they all got quite friendly and comfortable before the tea-tray arrived. Vera thought that Miss Burke looked far nicer than she had ever seen her, in her soft dark grey gown and bonnet to match. She had dressed herself with unusual care, and the soft neutral shades harmonised well with her clear pale complexion and reddish-brown hair. "She is certainly not bad-looking," she said to herself. "After all, I am rather sorry that we did not ask Margaret. I should rather have liked her opinion of Miss Burke. Oh dear, what large eyes Ranee is making! This will never do,

... behave herself, indeed, wi
to hug that dearest of all dear little housek
leave things to me," Vera had said. We
them, and this was the result. Was it any
blew a grateful kiss across the room! Ver
modest pride as she sat down to the tea-tabl
she had done her best, and that Ranee was

Hannah Burke felt a little surprised by t
good things offered to her; the young ladi
House lived well, she thought. Paris buns
baked—a particularly rich citron cake—wh
was only made by the best confectioner in A
—macaroons, marmalade sandwiches, hot cr
the work of Judith's hands—and some prese
and a little dish of clotted cream. As Rane
dered over these dainties, an uneasy suspicio
mind. "Did Vera mean to ask Peter for
She had faithfully promised not to draw fr
gency fund." Ranee's curiosity and perp
ardly allow her to eat or talk. "It was wi
ave made such a point of it" she th

dear, but then Peter was so fond of it. Vera did not repent her little sacrifice, it had given Ray so much satisfaction, and if no one else enjoyed here tea, Vera did.

It was wonderful how Hannah Burke thawed and unbent in this pleasant atmosphere. To the lonely woman the three fresh girlish faces were wonderfully attractive. "I can't help envying you," she said rather wistfully; "it seems to me that you can never know what it is to be dull."

"Oh no, we are never dull, are we, Vera?" exclaimed Ranee. She had just telegraphed rather anxiously to Sallie that some of the clotted cream must be saved for Peter. "Even on a hopelessly wet day we always find something to amuse us; and if we are restless, we put on thick boots and waterproofs and go for a constitutional. Peter never likes us to stay in over the fire, like three old grannies."

"Ah, you have your brother too," sighed Hannah. "If I had only some one belonging to me, how happy I could be. You must not think me complaining, or always harping on the same string, but I feel as if I must do something before long, for I can't bear the quiet any longer. One can't go against one's nature, and I must care for somebody."

"How do you mean?" asked Vera, touched by the quiet melancholy of Hannah's tone. "I don't like to think of your being so dull at Wayside. It is such a sweet house, and it seems to me that any one could be happy in it. You have to take care of all those lovely things that Mrs. Wallace left you." But Hannah's smile was a little strange.

"Old china and pictures can't give you loving looks when your heart is sad, Miss Holt; and even an inglenook can be dull when there is no kind face opposite you.

returned Vera. "I do not know h
If you want work and occupation,
the vicar would give you a district
her head at this suggestion.

"I am afraid you will think me
but I like to visit my poor neighl
and not to account to any one, ever
the way I do it. If nothing else tu
of asking the Doctor if he knew c
or infirm, who would be glad of a
am fond of going to sick people, a
suit me better than a district."

"I call that a splendid idea—do
joined enthusiastically in the conv
Peter will be the person to help
here Ranee broke off abruptly as th
reached her ears.

"Why, here he is!" she exclaime
footsteps approached. "How ver
You will be able to ask him now."

Yes, it was Peter, but a very di

him with wide-eyed astonishment. "Her father is bringing her on in the carriage. Vera, what room can we use?" But before the bewildered young housekeeper could answer, Ranee almost pushed her aside.

"Our room, of course, Peter—Sallie's and mine." Ranee always grasped a thing quicker than other people. "And my bed, please, because it is nearer the window."

"Very well." Peter was hurrying away, but Miss Burke's voice recalled him a moment.

"Doctor, you will let me help—you know I can nurse." Hannah was drawing off her gloves again in a quiet, business-like way. Then a look of relief came to Peter's face.

"Just the person," he returned heartily. "Come along, Miss Burke, you will be no end of use. They are so young," he observed in a low voice, as they left the room together, "and they have never been used to this sort of thing." Even at that anxious moment Peter was thinking of his sisters. What a godsend that this woman was here! she would be invaluable, he knew.

Vera, who was looking pale and upset, seemed somewhat hurt at this.

"I think it is very strange of Peter to ask Miss Burke to help him when we are all here," she observed; but Ranee would not listen to this.

"Nonsense, Vera. Hannah Burke knows all about nursing and we don't. But we can make ourselves useful. You must get out some clean sheets and towels. Oh dear, what a blessing Sallie had that tidying fit, for the quilts and toilets are all right. I will fly for hot water." And then Vera, roused to a sense of duty by these energetic remarks, forgot her wounded feelings and hurried after her sister."

The clean sheets had been brou
busily remaking the bed, when t
outside. Ranee caught her breat
then turned very white, as their
haired man entered the room ca
vised sort of stretcher with a gir
Ranee had a glimpse of fair hair
coat sleeve, and a blood-stained
gently put her aside as though she
her place. "Will you let me com
the Doctor wants me to do." H
bending over the patient. The
glancing round the room with sc
you kindly pull up that blind, M
all the light we can get. Vera, I
a roll of lint, and tell Judith to bri

"It is here, Peter." Vera spo
voice. Surely that was a dead fa
Peter noted both paleness and ag
notice until the girl returned.

"Thanks," he said briefly. "

"Don't keep me longer in suspense than you can help, Dr. Holt." And Peter nodded and shut the door.

"Your sister seems faint," observed Mr. Ashton, as Vera sank into a chair by the door. "Shall I fetch her a glass of water?"

"Oh, if you please," returned Ranee anxiously, as she made Vera rest her head against her. "Sallie, my youngest sister, will give it to you; she is in the drawing-room. And tell her, please, that she had better bring up the brandy. Vera will soon be better, but she never can stand the sight of blood."

"Oh, Ranee, no wonder Peter wanted to get rid of us," sighed poor Vera. "He knows what a little fool I am. I never can get over this horrid feeling of sickness when I see things——" and she shuddered as she spoke.

"Never mind, darling," returned Ranee tenderly; "it was so sudden—such a shock—it made me feel bad too. Oh, here comes Mr. Ashton with the water; drink some, and then lie down for a few minutes and you will be all right again." But Ranee's hand as she took the glass was not as steady as she wished.

Mr. Ashton watched them gravely, without speaking, and nervous and agitated as Ranee felt that moment, she could not help marvelling at his stoicism and stern repression. He was evidently in great anxiety, for the brown, weather-beaten face had a greyish tinge, and the firmly-closed lips were almost unnaturally pressed together. The eyes looked sombre and melancholy. He waited quietly until a tinge of colour came back to Vera's face, and then he turned silently away and walked to the other end of the passage, where he stood with his back towards them looking out of the window. He was still there, in the same rigid, immovable attitude, when Ranee

came out of her sister's room. She had persuaded her to lie down until the giddiness had passed, and had covered her up comfortably. She was on her way downstairs in search of Sallie, but paused for a moment irresolutely. How was she to leave him standing there in that forlorn and comfortless manner? Formidable as he was, she must speak to him.

"Mr. Ashton," and at the sound of her voice he turned at once—he might have been a grey monument or a pillar of salt like Lot's wife for all the expression he had, she said afterwards, for Ranee was never lacking in sense of humour—"will you not come downstairs and let me give you a cup of tea?" But he shook his head.

"Many thanks—I prefer to be here," half-turning away again. "Dr. Holt is a long time; he promised to let me know as soon as possible. Waiting is rather trying under the circumstances." Mr. Ashton's attempt at a smile was a grim failure.

The suppressed pain in his voice roused Ranee's womanly compassion.

"Yes, I know it is dreadful for you; but perhaps, after all, she is not so badly hurt. Peter has not really been long, but of course it seems so to you. Won't you sit down?" Ranee was bringing him a chair, but though he took it from her he made no use of it.

"It is easier to stand. Don't let me keep you, Miss Holt"—evidently he wanted to get rid of her—"you are very kind."

"But I cannot bear to leave you like this," returned Ranee with her old impulsiveness. She felt so sorry for him that the tears were in her eyes. She had told a fib. Peter had been an age; and oh how dreadfully quiet they were in the sick-room! It would be better for the poor

man to talk, instead of freezing up into an iceberg. "Won't you tell me how it happened?" she asked a little timidly. Ranee's voice was very sweet and persuasive, and Mr. Ashton started a little as he heard it; the tense muscles of his face relaxed slightly.

"I wish I could tell you," and here there was an involuntary shudder of the strong frame; "but I hardly know myself. I was in front, and High Street was crowded, but there was plenty of room to pass"—here he knitted his brows as though to recall something—"there was room for three bicycles abreast, and I called to her to follow me closely."

"Yes, I see," breathlessly.

"She must have been frightened and hesitated—Alix has grown very nervous of late. I was in a bit of difficulty myself with a dog that was running in front of my bicycle, and then it must have happened. There was a coal waggon and a brewer's dray; something made the brewer's horses swerve—I did not see—she was on the ground when I turned, and why she was not killed——" He stopped abruptly, and began to pace the passage. Ranee felt as though she had been cruel to make him talk. Oh how horrible it was! High Street had been freshly mended too, and the steam-roller was at work on one part. She began to feel sick, and then to her relief Peter came out of the room and beckoned to Mr. Ashton.

"You can go in for a moment," he said; "your daughter is conscious, but you had better not speak to her. Things are not as bad as I feared. She is badly bruised and shaken, but the spine is all right, and the cut is not serious. I regret to say, the small splint-bone—the fibula—is broken, but happily it is a simple fracture; a wheel must have gone over the leg."

"You are sure there is no permanent damage?" Mr. Ashton's dark piercing eyes were fixed on the young doctor's face.

"I am telling you the extent of my patient's injuries," returned Peter quietly. "Miss Ashton has had a nasty accident, and as I am not acquainted with her constitution it is impossible for me to judge of her recuperative powers, but I do not doubt that with time and patience she will do well."

"Thank God!" murmured Roger Ashton fervently; and then at a gesture from Peter he followed him into the room.

Chapter IX

"A GREY, MONUMENTAL MAN"

You must measure the strength of a man by the power of the feelings he subdues, not by the power of those which subdue him.—MARDEN.

Some one has said that there are two things that we should never worry about—the things that can be helped and the things that can't be helped.—*Ibid.*

RANEE was pouring out a somewhat disjointed and incoherent narrative into Sallie's horrified ears, when they heard footsteps outside, and the next moment Mr. Ashton entered the room, followed by Peter.

"I have brought Mr. Ashton to have some tea, Ranee," observed the latter cheerfully. "You had better make a fresh brew," with a glance at the empty tea-cups. Then Sallie ran off to the kitchen for hot water. "You can give me some too, for I am going to drive Mr. Ashton over to The Garth directly. I told you before, sir"—for Mr. Ashton seemed inclined to remonstrate—"it is not a quarter of a mile out of my way. I am bound to see Mrs. Sutton this evening—the Suttons of Brooke Farm, you know—indeed I was on my way there when the accident happened."

"I can never be thankful enough that you were on the spot," returned Mr. Ashton. "Miss Holt, I am troubled and ashamed to think of the inconvenience we are causing you; your brother tells me that my daughter cannot pos-

I told you before, it was the
circumstances; but for Dr. W
would have been carried to W
doubt that she would have
quarters there."

"Not at all," hastily. "I
understand me, Dr. Holt, for I
for your skilful help and gener
knows no law, and I am in you

"Your daughter will have e
ton," returned Peter earnestly.
that Miss Burke was in the
nursing and is thoroughly reli
drank their tea he gave a bri
Hannah Burke.

Mr. Ashton seemed somewh
mation. "I thought I recognis
"My daughter used often to go
remember I called once at Ways
some one told us she had left it
for Alix's sake

signs to him, "a bit upset, I suppose. That sort of thing is constitutional," turning to Mr. Ashton; "my mother was the same—she was a splendid all-round nurse, and so is Vera, but any sort of accident bowls them over."

"I thought Miss Holt was going to faint," returned Mr. Ashton. "I trust," looking at Ranee, "that she is better now?" He spoke a little stiffly and formally, with a sort of grave courtesy that seemed natural to him. Ranee noticed that he had not regained his normal colour.

"Well, we must be going," and Peter rose reluctantly. "Will you excuse me a moment, Mr. Ashton, while I give my sister a few directions;" and then he beckoned Ranee to follow him outside.

"I have no time to talk now; we will settle things when I come back. Vera is all right again, isn't she?"

"Oh yes, I think so; she is only a little giddy."

"Tell her to lie still; there is nothing for any of you to do. No one is to enter the sickroom until I return —remember that, Ra. If Miss Burke rings the bell, Judith will go to her, but no one else."

"Very well, Peter," for he was holding her by the shoulders and enforcing his words by a gentle shake. "But tell me only one thing, like a dear boy—what's the fibula? I heard you say to Mr. Ashton that the fibula—"

"What an ignoramus the child is!" he said good-humouredly. "In plain language, Miss Ashton's leg is broken; but happily it is only a simple fracture of the small splint-bone. It was a blessing I was on the spot to render first aid, or Reynolds from the Greyhound would have lugged her up like a sack of coals. He wanted us to carry her in there, but I knew they were making alterations, and the noise would disturb any invalid, so I suggested the Red House."

at a time, and keep your hea
gave her one of his sunny smi
warm her heart.

Mr. Ashton unbent a little 1
he shook hands with Ranee.

"I must thank you for your
ness," he said, with a sort of
seemed to chill her again. Evid
a demonstrative man. In real
touched by the girl's sweet, spo
had seen the tears in the bri
escaped Roger Ashton—but any
difficult to him. "A grey, mon
wickedly observed to Peter afte
of course—his face is the only r
I rather pity that poor little da
papa cannot be a very comforta
hasty, flippant little speech that
afterwards.

"Oh dear, what a very stern-l

ment and humiliation were so excessive that it was difficult to comfort her and restore her self-respect.

For wounded self-love is hard to bear, especially if one is thin-skinned and sensitive; as Ranee once graphically expressed it, one feels as comfortable as though one had sand in one's eyes, or grit between one's teeth, it sets the nerves jarring.

Ranee rose nobly to the occasion. "You need not look as though you had committed a crime," she observed cheerfully, as Vera sat down disconsolately in a corner of the couch. "Peter was as kind as possible about it. I heard him tell Mr. Ashton that you were a splendid all-round nurse like mother, and that your being so upset was purely constitutional." This was potent comfort, and Vera looked less depressed.

"I do try so hard to overcome it," she sighed. "Don't you remember, Ray, when Ebenezer cut his finger so badly, and there was no one else in the house, I forced myself then to bind it up, though I felt very sick all the time?"

"Yes, indeed, and Peter said he could not have done it better himself. Cheer up, Vera, accidents don't happen every day, and I don't mind confessing that I felt pretty bad myself;" and this judicious treatment soon brought Vera round.

Peter did not return until late in the evening; he went up at once to see the patient, and remained some time.

In spite of his hard day's work, he seemed as cheerful as ever, though he confessed that he was looking forward to his night's rest.

"They look very comfortable upstairs," he observed, as he sat down to his long-deferred meal. "How are you, old lady?" as Vera passed him. "A bit pale about

Margaret Weston wishes me to tell
"that her spare room is at your service
had better sleep there. I have promised
some one shall go to Wayside for to-nigh
is alone. To-morrow she will be able
arrangements, so it will only be for to
settle it between yourselves."

"Sallie had better go to Wayside,"
quickly. "Vera is far too tired and
would much rather sleep at the Weston's
run across to breakfast. I hope you will
the nursing, Peter. We will not inter
Burke, but we should dearly love to hel

"I will see about it," he returned eva
Sallie, my child, you had better pack you
tracks. I will walk to Wayside with you a
finished my supper; and Ranee may as w
Wynyards."

"Oh, do let me come with you to Wa
served Ranee coaxingly, for even a short
was a coveted treat; and then as he nodd

a favour. She told him that with a little help from Judith or the young ladies she would be able to manage, but she would be obliged to go home in the afternoon for two or three hours to make her arrangements and fetch what she required.

"I don't think we need refuse such a good offer," went on Peter. "Miss Burke will be most hurt and disappointed if we do not accept her services; so I shall tell Mr. Ashton when he comes to-morrow that we had better see how it answers. I don't want Vera to do anything for a day or two, but if you think you could sit with Miss Ashton while Miss Burke goes home——" But Ranee was too eager to let him finish.

"What a dear fellow you are, Peter! Of course I shall only be too delighted to help. I will do all I am told, and I shan't be a bit nervous." But at this point Peter cut her short. Wynyards was in sight, so he bade her good-night and crossed the road.

Ranee had the pleasure of recounting the day's experiences to Margaret before she retired to rest. She felt strangely wakeful, and it was easier to talk than to sleep.

"How little I thought last night," she said to herself as she laid her head on the pillow, "that my bed would be occupied by Miss Ashton, and that Hannah Burke would be spending the night under our roof. Peter seems to think a lot of her, but of course he has had plenty of opportunities of judging her capacity for nursing. I must try and learn things from her. I daresay she would let me help her sometimes instead of Judith." And then as she grew drowsy her thoughts wandered in another direction. "Mr. Ashton is a grand-looking man, but there is something sad about his expression. He does not

look happy, and what a pity that he has such a chilling manner! But Peter seemed to like him. I wonder if his daughter is very fond of him." Here Ranee's thoughts became confused and somnolent.

The excitement of the day influenced her even in her sleep, for she had one of those singular and improbable dreams that are often the result of an over-excited brain. She thought she was reading a big placard with "Alexandrine's Confession" written on it in glaring red letters, and that as she turned her head she saw Peter standing beside her looking exceedingly glum, as though something had put him out.

"They won't acquit her," he said gloomily; "they have brought her out for execution." And then to her horror Ranee saw Miss Ashton kneeling, with her eyes bound, before a block, and Roger Ashton, in a curiously cut garment, standing behind her with an uplifted axe.

Ranee sprang forward in an agony. "Don't let him do it, Peter!" she screamed. "He is her father—he must not be her executioner!" And it seemed to her that Roger Ashton answered her.

"When a child sins, she changes her parent into an executioner," he said in a hollow voice. "There were other fathers—Jephthah and Abraham; it is written in our law that she must die the death. Stand back, young lady, that I may do my work."

"No, no," shrieked Ranee, throwing herself upon him and tearing the axe from his hand, "you unnatural father, never, never!" and in the struggle she woke. The moonlight was stealing into her room. "Sallie," she said softly, and then she remembered that she was in the spare room at Wynyards. "Whatever made me dream all that rubbish?" she thought, as she turned her pillow. "How

Peter will laugh when I tell him!" But it was long before Ranee could compose herself to sleep.

The unwonted luxury of an early cup of tea refreshed her mightily, and she made her appearance at the Red House before Vera had made the coffee. Judith, who had taken up Miss Burke's breakfast, gave them the latest intelligence. Miss Ashton had slept very little during the night owing to the pain of her bruises, and had been somewhat feverish, but Miss Burke attached no importance to this. She had had a couple of hours' rest herself, and was not at all tired; they would be ready for the Doctor when he liked to go up.

"That red-haired woman has got a head on her shoulders," Judith had observed confidentially to Ebenezer a short time before. "She has tidied up the place as well as I could have done it myself, and there's the window open and the room as fresh and sweet as possible. But the young lady seems but poorly, to my thinking; she looks little more than a child, poor thing."

Ranee had to do some errands in the town. On her way she met Sallie, who told her that Mr. Ashton had just ridden up to the Red House. Ranee's amused laugh at this piece of intelligence rather mystified Sallie, but Ranee was only thinking of her dream. "It was too absurd," she thought, as she walked up High Street; "and yet even in that ridiculous garment he looked quite himself. Now what on earth put the idea of a paternal headsman into my silly little pate! And to think of Peter standing by and not lifting a finger to prevent the unnatural sacrifice!"

When Ranee returned an hour later laden with parcels, she saw a groom and two horses standing at Dr. Weston's door, and before she had taken many steps Mr. Ashton

came out, accompanied by Peter, and after a few words with him mounted and rode rapidly away. Peter, who was bare-headed, waved to her and went back into the house, and Ranee, eager for news, hurried into the store-room in search of Vera.

"Oh dear, how tired I am," she said, sinking into a chair, while Vera benevolently relieved her of her burdens. "I feel like a little grey ass with overladen panniers. Mr. Ashton has not paid a very long visit."

"Quite long enough," returned Vera placidly; "he was upstairs about twenty minutes. Miss Burke left him alone with his daughter, and came down to me. I am really beginning to like her, Ray, she is so extremely kind and thoughtful, and seems to think so little of her own comfort. By the bye, she wants to see you. I hear you are to sit with Miss Ashton while she goes home for an hour or two."

"Yes, Peter has arranged it. I hope you don't mind Vera dear."

"It is only what I deserve, after my silly behaviour yesterday," replied Vera, who had heroically made up her mind not to be jealous. "I daresay I shall take my turn another day."

"To be sure you will. But, Vera dear, did you speak to Mr. Ashton?"

"Only for a minute, and then Peter was with him. I was in the passage when they went out. He asked me how I was, and was very civil; but Peter hurried him away because Dr. Weston wanted to see him. I don't know how it is, Ray, but I am sure I could never get on with Mr. Ashton. It is not that I am afraid of him, but he somehow makes one feel like a little school-girl."

"I had something of the same feeling myself yester

day," returned Ranee—"I suppose it is his grand manner; and yet I am sure he meant to be kind. He softened wonderfully, and had quite a nice expression once or twice."

"Oh, I daresay he has his good points," replied Vera; "but I don't think it would be easy to get on with him. He looks a very strong-willed man. But, Ray, I am very busy. I have all these things to put away; and Miss Burke is waiting for you." And Vera, who knew Ranee's love for discussing abstract questions, and her habit of loitering when she could find some one to talk to her, hurried her away; she even took strong measures, and put her fingers in her ears, when Ranee paused on the threshold for a parting question.

Chapter X

ALIX

You have been saved once again from great danger . . . remember, you have been preserved for other purposes than you now think on.—Sir Walter Scott, *Woodstock.*

Cool as an icicle, and determined as the rock it hangs upon.—*Anne of Geierstein.*

As Ranee ran lightly upstairs, Hannah Burke came out of the sick-room and closed the door behind her.

"I have been listening for your footstep the last half-hour," she said, as she took the girl's hand. There was something magnetic in Hannah's strong warm grasp which always affected Ranee pleasantly. "There is so much in a hand-shake," she would observe; "it is often extremely characteristic of a person. I simply detest a slippery, uncertain grasp of one's fingers, and a friendly scrunch is almost as bad. Friendship is rather crushing sometimes, and leaves its mark behind."

Hannah still wore her pretty grey dress, but one of Judith's clean rough aprons protected it from harm. She looked as fresh as possible after her night's vigil, and her manner was bright and animated.

"I think it would be better for me to go as soon as possible," she went on, "and then I can get back earlier. There will be nothing to do for an hour or two; you can sit comfortably at your work. If you want any help, you can ring for Judith; she knows a good deal about nursing,

and she is as strong as a horse.. You are sure you don't mind being left?" and Hannah's grey eyes were a little searching. But Ranee would not own to any nervousness.

"I will do the best I can," she returned quickly. "How is Miss Ashton?"

"I can hardly tell you," was the answer. "She seemed rather brighter after I had given her her breakfast, but since her father's visit she has been a little quiet and depressed. I left them alone for a quarter of an hour, but when I got back the Doctor was with them, and he said Miss Ashton was tired and had talked enough. Now, my dear, if you will take off your hat, I will get ready to go. There are just one or two things to tell you, and please remember that though talking is not forbidden, it is necessary that my patient should be kept as quiet as possible;" and then a few simple directions followed.

When Ranee entered the room a few minutes later, Miss Ashton greeted her with a faint smile. She looked extremely young, almost childish. Her thick soft hair had been carefully arranged by her nurse, and the long fair plaits added to her youthful aspect. Her head was still bandaged, and she was very pale, and there was a strained, anxious expression in her large blue-grey eyes which spoke of mental or physical discomfort.

"You have come to sit with me while Miss Burke is out," she said gratefully; "you are very kind, and I am giving every one so much trouble. Miss Burke has been so good to me all night. I always liked her, but I shall care for her doubly now. I have promised her that I will be quiet and not talk much, but I think it tires one more to lie and brood over things"—with rather an oppressed sigh.

"Shall I sit where you can watch me work?" returned

Ranee who was seldom wanting in tact. "People sometimes find it amusing to see the bobbins fly. I am making some lace to trim my sister's dress;" and the innocent little ruse had the desired effect of turning Miss Ashton's thoughts into a pleasanter channel.

"Oh, how pretty! and how clever you must be. Yes, do sit where I can watch you." And then for a little while there was silence; but as Ranee wove her lace, her thoughts were busy with her charge. What a little, fair, childish creature Miss Ashton was! She could not guess her age; she looked about sixteen, but probably she was older; and though no one could call her pretty, she was extremely interesting, with a sweet expression. But neither father nor daughter had happy-looking faces.

The silence had lasted half an hour, and as the patient had closed her eyes, Ranee hoped she was dozing, but she was soon undeceived.

"How soon an accident happens," observed Miss Ashton suddenly in a weary voice. "One is in safety one minute, and the next——" she shuddered at the remembrance.

"Do not think about it," returned Ranee earnestly, "except to be thankful that it was no worse. My brother assures us that in a few weeks you will be able to walk again—at least he hopes so. Just a few weeks' confinement—well, what is that when one's life has been spared?"

"You are right," and Miss Ashton spoke with much feeling. "Indeed, indeed, I am not ungrateful, neither am I troubling about the future. I am in good hands. Your brother has been so kind, and very soon I shall have my dear old doctor back. We think so much of Dr. Weston—even father trusts him implicitly."

"Yes, he is a great favourite with most people. We are all devoted to him."

"He has sent me such a kind message—Dr. Holt brought it to me this morning; and he told him, too, that he wished to see father."

"I hope Mr. Ashton was satisfied with you?" asked Ranee; but she was sorry she put the question when she saw how the girl's face clouded.

"He did not think I looked well," she replied. "My bad night had tried me, for I ached so that I could not sleep. Father thinks the accident is all my own fault," she went on, and her lip took a sorrowful curve like a child who had been scolded.

"Oh, surely he did not tell you so!" exclaimed Ranee, quite shocked at the idea.

"Not in actual words, but of course I could see what he thought. Father never says much. What he really did say was that my fatal habit of indecision had led to the accident."

"How do you mean, Miss Ashton? I can't understand. It was no fault of yours that the brewer's horses swerved."

"No, but there would have been no accident if I had followed father at once. He had called out to me to ride close to him, but I hesitated. I am such a coward, Miss Holt, and I waited a moment too long, and that is how it happened. Oh, dear, I know I shall never have courage to ride my bicycle again. Father can't understand that sort of thing; he always says you must fight your nerves or they will master you."

"I wonder what Dr. Weston would say to that."

"I have never asked him"—another heavy sigh. "I am too much ashamed of my own cowardice to talk about

it to other people. Father thinks he is helping me by trying to brace and harden me, but I am afraid he begins to give it up. I notice he has never asked me to take a fence since I had a bad fall from my horse last spring."

"Another accident!" ejaculated Ranee; "dear me, how unlucky you are! But here comes Judith with your luncheon, and I must go and have mine, but I shall be back in a quarter of an hour."

Ranee had had strict injunctions from Miss Burke that she must not talk to the patient after luncheon. She was to shade the room carefully and leave her to take a nap. Ranee carried out these instructions, and seating herself where the subdued light might fall on her book, she prepared for a quiet afternoon. The story she was reading engrossed her attention, and she would have read on contentedly for hours, but a slight sound from the bed roused her—a little sobbing breath that could not be suppressed. Miss Ashton was not dozing as she thought. Her eyes were closed, but one large tear after another stole from under her eyelids and rolled down her cheeks, and she could see her breast heaving under her nightdress. The sight was too much for Ranee.

"What is it, dear?" she whispered, kneeling down by the bed. "Oh, don't be so unhappy! Don't cry so! Are you in pain, poor thing? Shall I ask Peter to come up? He is in the house, I am sure." But Miss Ashton held her wrist tightly to detain her.

"No, no, not for worlds. I am quite comfortable—in no bodily pain, I mean. It is only that I am so troubled and anxious, and being weak I cannot help crying. It does me harm to lie and think"—there was a fretful chord in her voice as she spoke, like a child complaining of ill-

usage—" it would be far better if you would talk to me a little."

"I will, indeed I will," and Ranee's warm heart was so moved to pity that she bent down and kissed the wet cheek. "Oh dear, it does make me feel so bad to see you so unhappy! There, I have hurt you," as the girl winced slightly. Ranee's horrified tone brought a little smile to Miss Ashton's face.

"You only touched my arm, which is badly bruised; but please don't look so sorry, it is nothing. Do you suppose I mind a little thing like that? If you will bring that chair near me and talk to me I shall be very grateful, and I will try not to be so silly again."

It would not have been easy to some people to comply with this request, but Ranee proved herself equal to the occasion. To be sure, Miss Ashton was an absolute stranger, but her nurse *pro tem.* set about her task in a simple, straightforward manner. She talked of Sallie's talent for drawing, and her own and Vera's favourite occupations, and she was soon rewarded by seeing that Miss Ashton grew interested. Before long Ranee had sketched quite an idyllic picture of their home life—their pleasant sociable evenings when Peter was at leisure. Vera was giving him singing lessons. He had such a nice voice, only it had not been trained. He played quite well on the banjo, too, and as she herself had learnt the mandoline, they had quite delightful little concerts. "Sallie is the only unmusical one," she went on. "She is very fond of listening to us, but her voice is weak and she only sings at church. She used to join in the choruses, but Peter rather hurt her feelings one evening by telling her that her voice reminded him of an escape in a gas pipe. He did not mean it really"—as Miss Ashton looked rather

shocked at this fraternal wit—"he only said it to tease her; but Sallie will have it that he was serious."

"I am afraid I am growing envious," sighed Miss Ashton. "Oh, how delightful it must be to have sisters and a brother!"

"We had two," returned Ranee quietly. "Dear Willoughby's death was such a grief to us, and I think it killed mother. She was too weak to bear such a shock. He had just left the university. He was such a clever boy and had got a scholarship, and then father said he would do his best for him. If he had lived he would have been such a companion for Peter, for they were so fond of each other. We never can get Peter to talk about him. If he hears us speaking of him he goes out of the room."

"Father does the same if I question him about mother," replied Miss Ashton. "I was so young when she died that I cannot recollect much about her; but if I mention her name he changes the subject. I think men rarely like to talk of their troubles, Miss Holt."

"Oh, don't call me Miss Holt," observed Ranee. "Vera is Miss Holt, and I do so dislike it. My name is Ranee."

"What a very odd name," rejoined her companion. "I don't think I ever heard it before, and yet it is very quaint and pretty. It is an Indian name, is it not?"

"Yes, I will tell you how I came by it," returned Ranee. "I think it will amuse you. Father told me all about it. Mother wanted me to be called Reine, because the name had taken her fancy, but father would not hear of it. He declared it reminded him of the nursery rhyme, 'Rain, rain, go away; come again another day,' and that he would always be saying it to the child; and mother knew he would. She was reading a very inter-

esting Indian story at the time, and she got the idea that Ranee would be a charming name—it means a princess, you know—and after a long argument she had her way. I rather like it myself. I am often called Ra or Ray."

"My name is Alexandrine," observed Miss Ashton. "Alexandrine Maud Ashton—but I am generally Alix to my friends." And then, to both the girls' regret, Hannah Burke entered the room, with a bunch of spring flowers in her hand; and, after a little more talk, Ranee was dismissed. Miss Ashton seemed unwilling to part with her. "You will come and sit with me to-morrow?" she pleaded; "you have done me so much good;" but Hannah, who thought her patient looked a little flushed, hurried Ranee away. "Of course she shall come to-morrow," she said soothingly, "but there has been enough talk for to-day. I see you have a headache and will be glad of your tea."

Peter, who soon became aware of his patient's low spirits, raised no objection to his sisters' frequent visits, and either Vera or Ranee spent an hour or two with the invalid while Miss Burke paid her daily visit to Wayside. Sallie, who was extremely shy, would creep in when one of her sisters was there; but she never stayed long, and seemed to find little to say. Alix liked them all, but from the first Ranee was her favourite, and the two girls soon grew intimate.

Mr. Ashton rode over daily, and always saw his daughter alone, but he seldom remained with her more than half an hour, and rarely saw any member of the family. He often left a token of his presence in the shape of a bouquet of hothouse flowers or a basket of fine fruit—"for the ladies, with my compliments," he would say, as

he handed them to Judith. Vera took care that a good share went up to the sick-room.

Hannah Burke, too, rarely came back from her walk without bringing some welcome contribution to the young housekeeper's larder—new-laid eggs or a jar of clotted cream, a chicken, or some delicacy to tempt the invalid's small appetite; and, as Margaret Weston was equally kind and thoughtful, and sent over nutritive soups and delicious jellies, Judith's culinary labours were much lightened and Vera possessed her soul in peace. "People are so good to us," she said to Ranee, "that my housekeeping accounts this week are not more than a shilling or two over the usual average. I felt really quite ashamed when Miss Burke brought that pair of fine chickens yesterday."

"It makes her happy to do things for us—I know it does," returned Ranee; for, being of a generous nature herself, she was quick to recognise it in others. "She has plenty of money, and I expect it is really a pleasure to her to spend it. I will give her a hint if you like, but I would much rather not."

"Well, I begged her not to bring anything more for a long time," owned Vera. "I told her I was quite oppressed by her liberality; but she only laughed and ran upstairs. Miss Burke is terrilby obstinate, I am afraid."

"Oh, I would not bother about such trifles," returned Ranee cheerfully. "I must hurry up now, Vera, for I have promised Miss Burke to sit with Alix this morning" —for by this time the girls had grown less ceremonious with each other.

One morning two or three days after the accident Ranee brought up Waif to amuse the invalid; but to her concern Alix's face wore a distressed expression.

"Don't you like him—shall I take him away?" she asked. "He has such funny tricks, and I thought they would make you laugh."

"No, please let him stop; he looks such a dear, and I am so fond of dogs. I was only thinking of Flossie; she will be fretting herself to death, poor darling. Father says she has not eaten properly since Thursday; he has to coax her to take her food."

"Is Flossie a dog?"

"Yes. She is such a beauty—she is a large brown-and-white spaniel. Don't you remember Elizabeth Barrett Browning's description of her dog Flush? I often repeat the words:

> Like a lady's ringlets brown
> Flow thy silken ears adown
> Either side demurely
> Of thy silver-suited breast—
> Shining out from all the rest
> Of thy body purely."

"Oh, I always thought that description so lovely!" exclaimed Ranee eagerly.

"Yes; and then it goes on—

> Underneath my stroking hand.
> Startled eyes of hazel bland.

Flossie's eyes are so beautiful—golden hazel, and they are almost human in their affection. We have never been separated before since she first came to me a little brown ball of a puppy. I know she will get quite thin with fretting for her mistress."

"Why should she not come to you here?" returned Ranee. "We are all animal lovers, and Waif is such a

gentleman, he will be as nice as possible to her, and I know she will be a comfort to you."

"Oh, how good you are!" returned Alix gratefully. "I think I never knew such kind people. May I really ask father to bring her?" And then it was settled between them that Peter's august permission was to be asked, and then Alix's request was to be made known to Mr. Ashton.

But, alas! they were doomed to disappointment. Peter raised no difficulty, but Mr. Ashton put down his foot at once.

"Father won't let me have Flossie," Alix said disconsolately; "he thinks me very childish and inconsiderate to ask such a thing. He says I give trouble enough already, and that I might surely trust him to look after her. And, oh, I suppose he is right." But Alix looked extremely dejected.

Ranee did not dare trust herself to reply, she felt so angry. Surely such a little thing might have been granted. "If I see Mr. Ashton," she said presently, when she had cooled down a little, "I shall tell him that it will be no trouble, but a great pleasure, to have Flossie as a visitor." But Alix did not seem cheered by this mark of sympathy.

"Father will not let her come," she replied; "it is no use speaking to him, Ranee, he never changes his mind." But Ranee was obstinately bent on taking her own way.

Her opportunity came the next day. She was just entering the house when Mr. Ashton rode up to the door. Ranee waited until he had dismounted and given his horse to the groom, and then they went into the house together.

"How is Alix?" he asked at once, as he put a basket of beautiful hothouse flowers in her hand; and then, after thanking him, she boldly made her petition. Mr. Ashton listened to her quietly; there was even a slightly amused

smile on his face as Ranee informed him that they were only too willing to have Flossie. "We are all devoted to dogs, Peter, my brother, especially, and we should love to have her. Please do let her come, Mr. Ashton; poor Alix has such a dull time of it, and she does so miss Flossie."

"You are all very kind," he returned, and there was a pleasant expression in his eyes, as though the girl's earnestness touched him, "and I am very sorry to refuse you, Miss Holt, but for many reasons I think Flossie had better remain with me."

"But she is so unhappy!"

"Not quite so unhappy as she was at first," he corrected, "and takes her food better now. I feed her myself, and she goes out with me, and when she is restless I give her some gloves of Alix's and tell her she will come back soon."

"But why not let her come to us?" persisted Ranee.

"There are several good reasons," he returned, in a cool, composed voice. "Flossie is not a small pet dog, and she is very lively, and Miss Burke would probably find her in the way. She would insist on sleeping close to her mistress, or no one in the house would be allowed to rest. I am obliged to take her into my own room, a thing I detest, and my nights are much disturbed in consequence. I am sorry to disappoint Alix, Miss Holt, but I must do as I think best, and she will soon be home." And after this there was nothing more to be said.

Alix did not seem surprised when Ranee confessed her want of success. "I told you it was no good speaking," she said quietly, "and that father never changes his mind. What did you say, Ranee, dear?" But Ranee was

her, and there stood Peter
mysteriously.

"There is a lady in the
you go down to her, Ra.
I believe."

"Yes, dear, who is it?"
twinkle came to Peter's eye

"It is a woman named I
walked away.

Chapter XI

"A WOMAN NAMED DAMARIS"

Her manner upon the whole is most engaging.—Sir Walter Scott.

She also loves her will; as, for that matter, show me the woman who does not.—*The Abbot.*

Peter had had his little joke and had fled into his room, and Ranee heard him lock his door; there was no help for it, she must go down and interview the formidable visitor. But if only Vera had been at home!

When Ranee was nervous she held her head very high, and looked a most dignified little person; but Mrs. Lugard put her at once at her ease, for she came forward in the most friendly manner and shook hands.

"I have come to inquire after the poor dear invalid," she said, and her voice was exceedingly pleasant and cultured. "I have just seen Dr. Holt, and he has given me permission to go up to Alix for ten minutes, if you will be good enough to take me."

Ranee looked at her rather doubtfully. "Miss Ashton seems a little tired this afternoon, but of course if my brother has given his sanction I can say nothing. Shall I go up and tell her you are here?"

"I think it would be better for us to go together," returned Mrs. Lugard, with a charming smile. "But there is no hurry for a few minutes. I am quite glad to have the opportunity of making your acquaintance, Miss

She was very attractive, R
the least pretty; she had a cl
very dark hair, and her brigl
almost youthful vivacity mad
she really was. She had a well-
and yet nothing could have be

"I never saw any one whos
she said to Vera afterwards.
tailor-made gown was Parisian

"Your sister is very pretty,
it was evidently easy to her to
speeches,—"I could not help
past. I hope we shall see y
long. I am a very sociable per
intend to stand on ceremony w

"Oh, thank you, you are
demurely, but her eyes were br
ment. Mrs. Lugard meant to
sure to invite them to her gard
Peter. She recalled her vagra

"Oh, yes, I know," but Ranee, who was not in charity with Mr. Ashton, was unwilling to discuss him. "I am afraid Miss Ashton will be expecting me," she observed hesitatingly. "Every one is out, and I am in charge of the patient."

"Then in that case we had better go up," returned Mrs. Lugard. She had a crisp, alert manner of speaking that took Ranee's fancy. "If you will lead the way I will follow you."

Alix looked extremely astonished when she saw the visitor, and flushed up either with pleasure or embarrassment, Ranee hardly knew which. "Why, Dawtie," she exclaimed, "I never thought of seeing you here!"

"I should think not," giving her a dainty little kiss on her forehead. "What a naughty child you have been, Alix, breaking your limbs and covering yourself with bruises in this ridiculous fashion. I quite squirmed when Heber told me last evening. I thought I should never go to sleep for thinking of the horrid thing; and as to Bear, she worked herself into a fever about it."

"Oh, Dawtie, surely you did not tell the poor child about the accident!"

Mrs. Lugard considered the point. "Did I, or did some one else? I have a memory like a sieve. Oh, I remember how it was now. I was asking nurse if she had heard about your accident, and was just telling her a little about it, when I found Bear had dropped her book and was listening with all her ears—I really think she has more than the ordinary number."

"'Oh, mother, is she killed?—is my dear Alix killed?' You know what an excitable little goose it is, nothing that I or nurse could say would soothe her. We had to send for Heber at last; he always knows how to manage her."

"She ought never to have heard," returned Alix in a low, remonstrant voice—"she is so painfully sensitive. Dawtie dear, it was really very careless of you. My poor little Bear!" But Mrs. Lugard only gave a light laugh.

"I know I am a dreadfully incautious person," she replied. "But don't worry about Bernardine. You are looking a little flushed yourself. The child is all right. I left her in the garden. Gavin was showing her the rabbits. What a pair of play-fellows they are! It is so odd to see them together. I believe that, next to Heber, Bear cares more for that big burly fellow than for any one else."

"I am not surprised," returned Alix. "Gavin Drayton is such a kind, tender-hearted man, and he is so fond of children. I often think how hard it is that he has none of his own."

"I am not quite so sure of that," with a light laugh; "children are doubtful blessings and immense responsibilities. I am rather glad that there are no noisy, mischievous little brats at the lodge. It is so much nicer to see old Martin sunning himself in the porch; he is such a picturesque old dear, with his blue eyes and long white hair, and his cheeks like wrinkled over-ripe apples;" and Mrs. Lugard laughed again.

"I think it was very hard on Gavin and Jenny when they lost their baby boy," returned Alix. "I was so sorry for them. I don't think Jenny has ever got over it."

"Oh, people get over everything," returned her friend. "You must not be morbid, my dear child. Do you know what your paternal tyrant told Heber—that he should never wish you to ride your bicycle again; that your want of nerve and decision must always expose you to danger."

"I knew father would say that"—Alix spoke in a depressed manner.

"What a pity it seems, and after buying that beautiful machine! Do you remember Nicholas choosing it that day at Paris, dear? What fun we had! By the bye, I wonder what Nicholas will say when I tell him about the accident?"

"I hope you will do nothing of the kind, Dawtie." Alix had grown very pale. Then she glanced apprehensively at Ranee. "Promise me that you will not write. But it is only your fun, of course." But Mrs. Lugard seemed rather amused at this anxious appeal.

"What an absurd child you are, Alix. Why should I not write to my step-son if I like, and why should your accident be enveloped in mystery. But there, don't fuss, you can write to him yourself if you like," in rather a significant tone; "he is still at the old address, Paris." But Alix, who had flushed rather deeply at this remark, looked a little hurt.

"I don't think it quite kind to tease me like this, Dawtie," she began, but Mrs. Lugard closed her lips with a kiss.

"I am very naughty, Alix, but I will run away and leave you in peace. I have not the slightest intention of writing to my dear old Nick for ages; you know I am the laziest correspondent in the world. Ta-ta, little one. I will come again in a day or two if Miss Holt will admit me. And do lie quiet, and leave off worrying, or you will be in a fever. I shall bring you some flowers next time, and we will have a nice little chat;" and giving her hand to the invalid, Mrs. Lugard left the room.

Alix looked so tired and exhausted after this interview that Ranee thought it wiser to leave her quiet. She only

remarked as she took up her book that it was raining rather heavily.

"What a pity," she observed regretfully, "for Mrs. Lugard has some distance to go."

"She was in the victoria, I suppose," returned Alix languidly; "the hood will prevent her from getting wet."

"Yes, but the poor coachman and horses. It really looks as though there will be a dreadful downpour," continued Ranee.

"She will not think of them," returned Alix. "Dawtie is rather an erratic little person, and she has not the knack of putting herself into other people's places. But my head aches so that I cannot talk," and this at once silenced Ranee. Alix certainly looked a little feverish, and she feared that her cheerful visitor had done her no good.

Ranee was not the only one who was having an exciting afternoon: Vera and Sallie also had their adventure.

Sallie had long wished to sketch a picturesque, tumble-down old cottage in a lane near Godstone Park, and Vera, who had an errand to do in the village, left her on her easel-stool happily at work and trudged off to do her business.

It was still so early when she had finished that she would have prolonged her walk, only some rather heavy drops of rain made her hurry off in search of Sallie. She met her half-way down the lane.

"There is going to be such a shower, Vera," she exclaimed, "and we have only one umbrella between us. We must really take shelter somewhere."

"The lodge is the nearest," suggested Vera. "Mrs. Drayton is always so pleased to see us, and we can ask after old Martin's rheumatism. Give me your drawing-block, Sallie, and we must just run for it, or we shall be

wet through." But the lane was a long one, and they were both panting and out of breath by the time they gained the lodge porch.

The door stood open, and they stepped at once into the living-room, which was half parlour and half kitchen; an inner door led to a neat little scullery where Jenny Drayton did her cooking and washing. The Holt girls were very fond of this room. The long mullioned windows were framed in creepers, which in summer time were covered with bloom; and the low window-seats, with their faded cushions, were very inviting to tired visitors. The big elbow-chairs on either side of the fireplace were always appropriated by Sam Martin and his son-in-law; and the oak dresser, full of blue willow-pattern china, and the mantelpiece, with its wonderful display of brightly-scoured tins and gleaming brasses, were the pride of Jenny's heart. There was no such notable housekeeper in Godstone village as Mrs. Drayton at the lodge. "A right-living woman is Jenny, with a rare spirit for work, and never spares herself trouble and elbow-grease," as one of her neighbours remarked. And it was a fact that careful mothers would bring round their daughters who were on the eve of matrimony to gaze with admiring, awe-struck eyes at the shining copper and brass and tin vessels that hung in dazzling rows almost to the ceiling.

"They are a fine sight—most like a picture," one rustic damsel observed; "but they seem too good to be used." But Jenny modestly negatived this. "They always used the big candlesticks on high days and holidays, and Gavin, her man, wouldn't have drunk his ale at noonchen and night except out of the pewter, where he could see his honest face reflected on the gleaming surface."

The room was not unoccupied, for a strange man sat

in Sam Martin's usual seat. He had an empty bird-cage on his knee, which he seemed to be repairing. A canary in a small box-like cage on the table was peeping at him between the bars, and chirping a little disconsolately, as though it could not make up its mind to sing in such close quarters.

"Oh, please don't let us interrupt you," observed Vera in her pretty way, as the stranger rose in some embarrassment at the sight of two young ladies; "we have only taken refuge from the rain, it is pouring so. I hope," with a glance towards the scullery door, "that Mrs. Drayton is not out."

"They are all out," was the answer. "Sam Martin went down the village but an hour ago, and Jenny accompanied him. Gavin is about the grounds somewhere; I expect he will turn up directly. Will you sit down?" placing chairs as he spoke; "there seems to be a heavy shower at present."

"Yes, but please go on with your work. I see you are getting a cage ready for that poor canary; it has hardly room to move." Vera was trying to appear at her ease, but she was inwardly perplexed. She had thought at first that it was one of Gavin Drayton's friends—probably a relative of his own or his wife—but his voice undeceived her, it could only belong to a gentleman. And yet there was something very odd about him; he seemed a little gauche and awkward in his movements.

She glanced at him as he stood hesitating for a moment. He was a short and thickly-built man, dark-complexioned and rather ordinary-looking, that was her first hasty impression; then she grew suddenly hot, for a disturbing idea had come to her. Her embarrassment was so evident that the stranger gave a nervous little laugh.

"I am Sir Heber Maxwell," he said abruptly, as though answering her unspoken question, and then he went back to his work. Sallie, who had ensconced herself comfortably on the farthest window-seat, opened her eyes rather widely as he said this, but Vera sat in discomfited silence. What a singular man Sir Heber must be, she thought, he spoke so abruptly and seemed so little at his ease. Then she remembered Peter's description, "a short, dark man, rather like a butler," etc., and had some difficulty in suppressing a smile. It was true to the life, she thought; then she looked at him again.

He was hard at work and evidently in a hurry, as though he was bent on finishing his job by a given time, for he looked up at the clock once.

He was not young, about forty, Vera thought, and Peter was right, he did not in the least resemble his sister. He was decidedly plain. He had evidently shaven off his moustache rather recently, for there was a dark line visible where it had been. As Vera watched him a little curiously, she was struck by the neatness of his work. He had rather well-shaped hands, somewhat tanned by exposure to the weather. As though conscious of the girl's scrutiny, Sir Heber suddenly looked up.

"Jenny lost her linnet last week," he said abruptly—he was certainly a little quick and uneven in speech—"and I picked up this young canary at the bird-fancier's. I am just mending up the old cage, and I want to finish it before she gets back;" and then he bent over his work again.

"Oh, how pleased Jenny will be," observed Vera, rather pleased to find some opening for conversation. "She is so fond of birds, and her linnet was so tame—it would feed from her hand." Then, unwilling to disturb

I will loosen that wrap, and
fire. Here's Mr. Right, and
and don't catch your little fe
moment there was the tappi
brick floor, as a little girl ca

"Why, Uncle Heber!" s
then she checked herself and
of the two young ladies.

Sir Heber put down his ca
you wet, Bear?" he asked ra
his hand over the child's lon

"Not the least little mite,
"Gavin wrapped me up so ni
here. He was quite out of
you, Gavin dear?" as a tall
gamekeeper's dress entered t
ruddy face and blue eyes.

"It is pouring cats and do
cheerfully. "Good afternoo
ceived her. "I am glad tha

shook himself like a big Newfoundland and disappeared, and they could hear him rattling cups and saucers in the distance.

Bear clapped her hands with glee. Sir Heber had placed her in one of the big arm-chairs, and had taken off her large overshadowing hat. She looked about ten years old, and had a lovely little face, though it was thin and white and had a worn, unchildlike expression, probably the result of prolonged pain. She was evidently suffering from spinal disease, but the slight malformation was disguised by her loose white serge jacket. She was also rather lame.

"Oh, do let me make tea, Uncle Heber!" she continued imploringly, quite forgetting her shyness in her eagerness for the coveted treat.

"If this young lady—Miss Holt, I believe—does not mind," he returned, with a glance at Vera. Then she smiled and edged her chair a little nearer. Vera adored children, and the crippled child appealed to her at once.

"Do you like making tea, dear?" she said, with such gentleness that Bernardine was won in a moment.

"Oh, yes, I love it," with childlike frankness; "and nurse sometimes lets me make it for Uncle Heber when he comes up to the nursery. He says he never tasted nicer tea; didn't you, dear? But mother never lets me make it for her," with a melancholy shake of her head; "she says it makes her so nervous, and she is afraid of my breaking something. I told her once that they were Uncle Heber's cups and saucers, and that he would not mind the least little bit if I smashed them all. You know you said so," with an appealing look. "But mother only laughed and said you were always so ridiculous, and that she could not possibly allow such a thing."

"Never mind," returned her uncle hastily, "you shall make tea for me in the library one day, and we will tell Collins to bring the Worcester tea-set."

"But mother would not hear of such a thing." Bear spoke quite apprehensively.

"Mother won't know anything about it," he returned quietly; "she will be driving miles away. Besides," with a smile that lighted up his plain features and made them less homely, "they are my own cups and saucers, Bear;" and Sir Heber's tone was so comical that not only Vera but Sallie laughed.

Chapter XII

"AN ORDINARY, TRIVIAL LITTLE SOUL"

Oh, what would the world be to us
If the children were no more!
We should dread the desert behind us
Worse than the dark before.

LONGFELLOW.

For good ye are and bad, and like to coins,
Some true, some light, but every one of you
Stamp'd with the image of the King.

TENNYSON.

THAT laugh broke the ice, and by the time Gavin Drayton returned with the kettle, Sallie had left her corner and edged herself into the circle, and three pairs of interested eyes were watching the transfer of the canary to its new and far more desirable abode.

"There you are, old fellow," observed Sir Heber in a satisfied tone; "tune up and give these ladies a song."

"You must whistle to him, Uncle Heber; you always do to Goldie, and then he sings so beautifully." And thus adjured, Sir Heber good-naturedly whistled a few bars of a popular tune, which was answered by the bird's sweet trill.

"The wife will be rarely pleased," observed Gavin in a gratified tone as he cleared the table; "she was asking me to get her a bird only this morning. 'It drives me

silly to see the empty cage,' she said, 'and no little Dick to call to me for a lump of sugar.' I never knew a woman to beat Jenny in her love of creatures; if she could have her way the lodge would be full of stray dogs and homeless cats." Gavin was arranging the tea-tray as he talked. "There, we have got things pretty ship-shape, and if one of these young ladies——" But Bernardine interrupted him in manifest anxiety.

"Uncle Heber says I may make tea, Gavin!" she exclaimed eagerly.

"Bless your little heart, then you shall, Ladybird!" exclaimed the good-natured fellow. "Wait a moment until I fetch some cushions for that chair." And then, with the tenderness of a woman, he lifted the child and placed her comfortably at the table.

"We will leave Mr. Right and Mr. Left to take care of themselves," he said cheerily. "Now you are all right, missie, aren't you? And if Miss Holt will just sit beside you, to help you if the teapot is too heavy for your little hands——" But Vera hesitated.

"I don't think it rains much now," she observed, going to the door. To her surprise, Sir Heber followed her.

"It will not clear up just yet," he said, "and there is no use getting wet. Besides, the child's tea-party will be spoiled; it will be a pity to disappoint her;" and then Vera yielded.

Gavin waited upon them and mixed freely in the conversation; he and his master seemed on the best of terms.

Since his little niece's arrival on the scene a marked change had come over Sir Heber, and his awkwardness and gaucherie of manner had almost wholly disappeared. He was evidently a shy, reserved man, who would never appear to advantage with strangers or in uncongenial

company. Vera's gentleness and Sallie's quiet manner gave him confidence, and he seemed more at his ease. He talked chiefly to Sallie; he had noticed her drawing-block and asked to look at her sketches, and they were soon deep in discussion of the various picturesque places to be found in the neighbourhood of Godstone Park. They found out that Sir Heber was very fond of sketching, and that he was an ardent photographer, and had quite a large collection of photos he had taken in Switzerland and Italy.

"When you come to see my sister I must show them to you both," he said, and his manner was decidedly friendly. Vera, who overheard his remark, hardly knew what reply to make; but Sallie, who always forgot to be shy where her work was concerned, was very ready with her answer.

"Oh, I shall love to see them, and Vera, too; we have never been abroad, you know, and it is nice to have some idea of all those beautiful places. How we have longed to see Rome and Florence and Venice; haven't we, Vera?"

"I spent one winter in Rome," returned Sir Heber; "my sister had a fancy to join some friends there. We lived in a big palazzio belonging to a princess—suites of immense bare rooms, with painted ceilings and little furniture—but I often wished myself at Godstone; an English home and English comfort is more to my taste."

"I think I should have liked the palace best," observed Sallie dreamily; but Sir Heber only smiled.

"Oh, you are young and an artist. But I have had enough of foreign life. Last winter we had a flat in Paris, but I grew tired of it, and came backwards and forwards to Godstone. I rather enjoyed playing the hermit; but Bernardine was always writing to ask me to

come back. You would not give me any peace, would you, Bear?"

"I was so lonely," returned the child, a little sadly; "and I do so hate to be without you, Uncle Heber. Mother and Nicholas were always out; and driving tired me so; and Alix could not often come to me. Oh," with a profound sigh, "don't let us talk about Paris; I did feel so miserable there. And you know you hated it, too, Uncle Heber, for you kept running away. I think my head ached every day; and there was no Gavin to make me forget it," and Bear's eyes were full of tears.

"Well, never mind," returned her uncle hastily. "Suppose you pour me out another cup of tea—two lumps of sugar, please. Gavin's tea is so good that I must really have a third cup."

"Isn't this a lovely tea-party!" exclaimed Bear, restored at once to sunshine. "I don't think I have ever felt so happy. You will come again, won't you, Miss Holt? for I do like you so much. And your sister too," feeling she had been unpolite and anxious to make amends. "She is very nice, only not quite so pretty as you; is she, Uncle Heber? You are so very pretty, you know."

"Why, there is the sun peeping out from the clouds!" exclaimed Sir Heber, suddenly jumping up from the table. "I think there ought to be a rainbow presently;" and he was so long in the porch that Vera's cheeks had time to cool.

"Good-bye, dear little Bear," she said, kissing her. "Sallie, we must really run home now."

She was in such a hurry that she had no time to look at Sir Heber as she shook hands with him.

"You had better make haste," was all he said as he

opened the gate for them; "the sunshine is delusive. I am afraid there will be another shower directly; it would have been wiser to remain in shelter a little longer;" but Vera turned a deaf ear to this.

Her cheeks burnt again at the remembrance of the child's speech. It was nonsense to mind such a thing, for of course Sir Heber understood, and it showed very good feeling on his part to change the subject so effectually. Children often made embarrassing speeches, and Bernardine seemed very young for her age. But here was Sallie alluding to it.

"You need not have rushed off in such a hurry," she said; "I think Sir Heber was rather amused at you. What was the harm of Bear thinking you prettier than me, when every one knows that you are?"

"Yes, but it made me feel so silly telling me so to my face. Not that I really minded her saying it, if she had not appealed to Sir Heber. You would not have liked it yourself, Sallie."

"Oh, but he was so nice and gentlemanly that it did not matter a bit. Do you know, Vera, I really like Sir Heber. He is not young, he looks quite forty, and I think he is rather ugly."

"No, not exactly ugly."

"Well, plain, then—decidedly plain; but he looks good, and he has kind eyes."

Vera nodded. Sallie's observations always interested her sisters. She was exceedingly shrewd and quick in her judgments of people, and her bright eyes let few things escape them.

"I don't know that he is specially clever," went on Sallie. "He is intelligent, but not bookish, I fancy; at least he cares more for pictures and country life. His

face quite lighted up when you spoke of the woods. He really isn't so very plain when he talks."

"Nothing could make him handsome, though," replied Vera, who had a girl's predilection for good looks. But Sallie seemed bent on making the best of her new friend.

"Well, I don't think it matters whether a man is good-looking or not," she returned obstinately, "if he is only nice. That dear little Bear seems devoted to him; and he was so gentle with her. Do you really think his sister will call on us, Vera? I do so want to see those views." And on this subject Vera found plenty to say.

Their long absence had puzzled Ranee, and she overwhelmed them with questions, which Vera wisely refused to answer until she and Sallie had changed their wet frocks.

"We waited as long as we could, and then took advantage of a gleam of sunshine," she said; "but the rain has come down again."

"Sir Heber said it would," broke in Sallie.

"Sir Heber! What do you mean, girls? Have you—have you really——" But Vera clutched Sallie by the arm.

"Come and change at once," she said decidedly. "We shall enjoy our talk far more when we are dry and comfortable. I think you might light the fire, Ranee. Peter would like it when he comes in; it is so very damp and chilly."

And Ranee went off pretending to grumble. Sir Heber! they had actually seen the hermit of Godstone Park. They had come back inflated with pride and consequence. Well, she had her own story to tell; they would not have it all their own way. And then Ranee lit the fire, and

sat on the rug, talking to Waif, and trying to restrain her impatience until the sisters returned.

A delicious hour ensued—questions, answers, exclamations, a hubbub of girlish voices. Peter, coming in tired from a long round of visits, was drawn like a magnet into the circle, and listened half-drowsily in his corner.

"Go on, Sallie." Ranee's voice was full of excitement. "Peter never minds one talking when he is having a nap. You say you like Sir Heber?"

"Yes, I do." Sallie spoke without hesitation. "I think I like him better than Vera does. She can't get over his being so very ordinary-looking."

"Vera's a goose!" Peter's wide-awake voice made them all jump. "Sir Heber is a good fellow. Dr. Weston was saying so only this morning. He is not a society man or much of a talker, but he has got genuine stuff in him. Now let's hear what Ranee thought of Mrs. Lugard."

And then the girls' tongues were let loose again; but when Ranee had finished her lengthy and brilliant description, lo, the graceless Peter was asleep.

When Ranee found herself alone with Alix the following afternoon, she at once began talking about Mrs. Lugard. She had a frank curiosity about people who interested her that was quite insatiable.

"I do want to know what you think about her," she said coaxingly. "I thought her so delightful; she had such pretty, bright ways. By the bye, what was that odd name you called her—Dawtie, was it not?"

"Yes, it is a pet name that her father gave her when she was a child, and she has kept it ever since. It is Scotch, you know, and means daughter or little daughter, I don't know which."

"It is not half as pretty as Damaris," observed Ranee; "there is something so quaint and original about that."

"Yes, but it is too big a name for Dawtie," returned Alix, smiling. "There is nothing great about her. As some one said, 'she is just an ordinary, trivial little soul.' I never forgot that speech. I think it is true. Dawtie is certainly not a deep person."

"I see what you mean," and here Ranee reflected a moment. "It is nice, of course, when people have lots in them, and when you dig deep and come upon a vein of gold. Margaret Weston is deep—you never come to the end of her; that's so nice—but Vera is perfectly simple. I have lived with her all my life, and I have not come upon any hidden depths yet. She is a nice, straightforward, comfortable, all-round person."

"Your sister! Oh, she is charming, and she has such a sweet disposition; but Dawtie is not a bit like her. She is very good-natured and ready to do kind things, but she is selfish too, though one does not always find it out; she is fond of pleasure, and hates to be bored and inconvenienced; she is certainly not a patient person; and—oh, it is difficult to describe her accurately."

"You mean that there is something complex about her?"

"Yes, I suppose so; I don't always understand her; she is a contradictory little person."

"But you are fond of her, Alix?" But to Ranee's surprise the girl hesitated a moment.

"I am not quite sure that I am as fond of her as I used to be. When I first knew her I was as infatuated as possible. I remember telling father that she was the nicest person I had seen for a long time. We met first in Rome, and afterwards we were together in Paris."

Ranee nodded; there was no doubt of her interest.

"I remember how pleased I was when she told me that they were coming to live at Godstone Park, and that we should often meet. I was not well in Paris, and father left me with an old cousin of his, Madame Begère; and Dawtie was so nice to me then, bringing me flowers and sitting with me by the hour together. Oh, she seemed to me so delightful; and then I am so fond of dear little Bear."

"Captain Lugard was with her, was he not?" asked Ranee; "Vera told me so. Is he nice, too?"

"Oh, yes, he is nice," rather hastily; "he is a very handsome man. You know Mrs. Lugard's husband was quite elderly when she married him. He was rather a fascinating person, and Dawtie, who was very self-willed and impulsive, insisted on marrying him, though her father and brothers strongly disapproved."

"That was very wrong of her," observed Ranee. But Alix took no notice of this remark.

"Mr. Lugard was not a satisfactory person," she went on; "he was rather gay and extravagant, and they guessed that his affairs were involved. Sir Henry, Dawtie's father, was in bad health just then—indeed, he only lived about eighteen months afterwards—and Dawtie managed to hoodwink him and get her own way, but she soon found out her mistake. Mr. Lugard was a handsome man, and women found him irresistible, but his fine old estate was heavily mortgaged, and Dawtie's little fortune was soon dissipated; and when he died she and her little girl were absolutely penniless, for of course Nicholas—Captain Lugard—was unable to help them, he was only a subaltern then."

"Oh, dear, what a pity Mrs. Lugard married him; but I suppose she was in love with him."

"She imagined that she was, but I don't think Dawtie has very deep feelings. By her own account she was tolerably happy for a year or two, and had a good time—they lived abroad, you know. She did not find out for a long time where the money went, but most of her friends could have told her."

"I suppose Mr. Lugard gambled?"

"Yes, there is no doubt of it, but he was fairly successful; it was only after his death that they found out where Dawtie's money had gone. There were no proper marriage settlements, they married too hastily for that."

"Do you mean she actually ran away with him?"

"Oh, you must not ask me that," returned Alix quickly; "I am telling you too much as it is. Poor Dawtie was left in Paris with hardly a sou in her possession, and Sir Heber—he was not Sir Heber then—had to go to her. Both her brothers were so good to her—and she looks upon Godstone Park as her home."

"Poor thing," and Ranee heaved a compassionate sigh "who would have thought that bright-looking creature had lived through such a tragedy?"

"It would have crushed some natures," returned Alix "but Dawtie takes troubles as lightly as she does most things; when the pressure is once removed she soon forgets all about it. That is why I do not always understand her; in her place"—and here Alix spoke in a tired voice—"I could never forget."

"Dear Alix, I am wearying you, please do not talk any more."

"It is not that," sighing heavily. "Ranee, I was going to ask you something; is it not rather strange that father

has not been near me to-day? I was looking for him all the morning."

"Perhaps something prevented him, one never knows," returned Ranee cheerfully; "it is only four o'clock now, and he may still come. Hark! I am sure some one is coming upstairs now, I hear footsteps clearly"; and almost before the words were out of her mouth Hannah Burke half-opened the door..

"Some visitors have come to see you, Miss Ashton," she said in her pleasant voice, and there was a look of unmistakable amusement on her face.

Chapter XIII

A SURPRISE AND AN INVITATION

> And if one or two quick tears
> Dropped upon his glossy ears,
> Or a sigh came double,
> Up he sprang in eager haste,
> Fawning, fondling, breathing fast,
> In a tender trouble.
>
> MRS. BROWNING.

THE next moment there was a swift, scurrying sound in the passage, and something passed Hannah like the wind, and to Ranee's intense astonishment a beautiful brown-and-white spaniel sprang upon Alix's bed, whining with joy, and every now and then giving vent to short, excited barks of delight as she licked the soft little hands that were caressing her.

"Oh, my Flossie—my darling Flossie!" and Alix hugged her favourite close, and it was a touching sight to see how the pretty creature nestled up to her, and the almost human way in which the glossy head rested against her shoulder. Flossie had no eyes for any one but her beloved mistress. She had worn herself thin with fretting, and now she had found her at last! "My pet, my precious pet! Look at her, Ranee; she is trembling so with joy and excitement that I can hardly hold her. She has been so unhappy, the dear thing!" and Alix's voice was a little choked. "Oh, father," as Mr. Ashton entered the room, "how good and kind you have been to

me!" and there was a pathetic look of gratitude in Alix's eyes.

"I am glad you are pleased, my dear," he said, as he kissed her quietly. "But Flossie has not come to stay, you know; she is only paying you an afternoon visit." Then, as Alix's face fell a little, "I have not changed my mind, you would hardly expect me to do that, but there will be no harm in bringing her when I come."

"Thank you, father, Flossie and I will be grateful for that"; but the pink colour faded out of Alix's face, and she spoke in her old subdued murmur. As Mr. Ashton turned to shake hands with Ranee, a tear of disappointment fell on the dog's glossy head; another would have followed, only Flossie sprang up with a troubled look and licked it away; for Alix was still weak and easily depressed.

Ranee was so fascinated by the dog's beauty and gentleness that she could hardly tear herself away, and it was some minutes before she followed Hannah down-stairs. There was an amused expression on Mr. Ashton's face as he opened the door for her. "You look almost as pleased as Alix,' he said, with a grave smile. "You see, I am not quite so severe as you thought me, Miss Holt; Flossie will be all right now that she sees with her own eyes that her mistress is alive, and I shall bring her with me to-morrow."

"Oh, yes, thank you," and Ranee flashed a grateful glance at him as he shook hands with her, and Roger Ashton went back into the room rather thoughtfully.

"A nice, honest little girl," he said to himself. "There is no guile in that face; she will be a safe companion for Alix; far better than that little society person Mrs. Lugard,—though she is pleasant enough in her way." And

then he sat down beside the bed and took his daughter's hand. "I want to take counsel with you, Allie," he said gently; "please give me your attention, and leave Flossie alone."

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Mr. Ashton was a man of his word, and Flossie came every day to visit her mistress. Dr. Weston, who was well enough to resume work, was also a constant visitor.

One morning when he and Mr. Ashton and Peter had been holding a consultation in the study, Peter came into the sitting-room with the air of one who has something important to say.

"Are you all here, girls? That's right, I have something particular to say. Mr. Ashton wishes his daughter to be removed to The Garth the day after to-morrow, and, as Dr. Weston quite approves, I have nothing to say. I daresay she will be far more comfortable in her own home."

"Oh, no, Peter!" exclaimed Ranee, aghast at this intelligence. "Alix has said over and over again that she has never been so comfortable. Oh dear, what a pity! I think it is such a mistake on Mr. Ashton's part, for Alix will miss us so much."

"Yes, I hinted at that; but it was not my business to interfere," replied Peter. "I think it is quite natural that Mr. Ashton should want to have his daughter back. She has been here nearly three weeks, you know, and though none of us mind the inconvenience, we can't expect him to believe that."

"Of course Miss Burke will go with her?" observed Vera.

"Well, I suggested it, for I knew she would be willing to go; but Mr. Ashton would not hear of it. He said

that she had already laid him under obligations that he was at a loss how to repay. Indeed, with respect to Miss Burke, he seemed almost painfully embarrassed. For, as he explained to us, he could not offer her money, as she was a woman of means, and there seemed no way of making any return. It is a bit awkward, I confess."

"I don't see it," returned Ranee quickly; "but Mr. Ashton is such a proud man that he hates to be beholden to people. Hannah Burke has done it just for love's sake, because it makes her happy to take care of people. She has just been in her element all this time, and it is a shame that he does not ask her to go to The Garth with Alix."

"He has asked some one else, you see," and Peter's voice was a little mysterious.

"What do you mean? Oh!" turning very red, "you surely are not going to tell me that——" and here Ranee stopped as though she could not trust herself to put the question.

"I see you guess my piece of news, Ra," returned her brother. "Yes, Mr. Ashton has very kindly invited you to pay a long visit at The Garth. He was good enough to say that your society would do his daughter a world of good. He seemed to think you a sensible little person; but we know better, don't we, Vera?"

"Don't, Peter—don't joke!" for this was a tremendous piece of intelligence to Ranee. With the exception of Wynyards, she had never slept a night anywhere out of her own home. And to stay at The Garth! No wonder her cheeks were flaming with excitement. "But it will be a great responsibility," she went on seriously. "I have learnt a good deal from Hannah Burke, but I am not much of a nurse, I am afraid."

"You won't be required for nursing, my dear chi
Mr. Ashton's housekeeper, Mrs. Binney, will do all th
is required. She has lived with them a great ma
years, and is a very efficient woman."

"Oh, yes, we all liked her so much," observed Ve
"for the worthy woman had paid her young mistr
several visits, and each time she had come laden w
good things, ostensibly for the invalid. Indeed, as V
remarked more than once, they had never fared m
luxuriously than they had during these three week
every one was so kind to them.

"Besides," went on Peter in his professional voi
"Miss Ashton will not want much nursing now;
shall get her on to her crutches to-morrow. Dr. West
agrees with me that cheerful companionship is wh
she needs most. She seems inclined to give way to l
spirits. I expect her life is too quiet and lonely. M
Ashton is too grave and self-centred a man to be a liv
companion for a girl of nineteen."

"Is she so old as that, Peter?" asked Vera doubtful
"she looks such a child."

"I believe so—some one told me so. Oh, it was y
Ra?" And Ranee nodded. "Now I must be off. W
you go up to her, please? I have asked Miss Burke
come downstairs for a few minutes, and I promised M
Ashton to send you to her as soon as possible;" a
Ranee needed no second bidding.

She found Alix brimming over with excitement.

"Come and sit down," she said breathlessly. "
is it not dear of father to propose it? You will co
Ranee, will you not?"

"Do you really want me, Alix?" returned her frie
teasingly.

"Want you? I should think I do! Do you know, I have never had a girl of my own age to stay with me before in all my life. Father never cared for me to make very close friends. Indeed, I never had much opportunity for doing so. I knew Dawtie better than any one else."

"Oh, but she is older, and a married woman besides."

"Yes, I know. She has such a sanguine temperament, and always looks on the bright side of things, and that keeps her younger. She is not much over thirty. I forget her age exactly, but she married at nineteen."

"That is your age, Alix."

"Yes," colouring slightly; "I was nineteen on New Year's Day, so I am nearly nineteen and a half. Father took me over to Paris again for a birthday treat. I had chosen that, and I spent a month with dear old Madame Bergère. She is rather an invalid and never goes out in the winter, but her *bonne* Marie always attended me. Before father left he made me promise never to go out alone." Alix's eyes wore a dreamy expression, but Ranee's next words recalled her to the actual present.

"And you really and truly wish me to come? You are sure you would not have preferred Hannah Burke?"

"Certainly not. But I am very fond of Hannah all the same—she has been so good to me. But it is you I want most, Ranee." Alix said this a little shyly; it was such a new thing to have a friend of her own. "Hannah has promised to come and see us very often. She declares that she will miss me very much, and that she has so enjoyed nursing me. Well, then, it is settled, Ranee, and you are coming back with me to the Garth on Thursday."

"Another eventful Thursday," returned Ranee, smil-

ing. "Dear me, how very interesting and exciting life is just now."

"It is rather too exciting," observed Alix in a low voice. Ranee thought she was alluding to her accident and was rather puzzled by her sad expression; but the next moment she roused herself again. "Father says that you are to stay a long time, Ranee, and that he wants you to settle down and feel quite at home. He must have taken a fancy to you or he would never have said that. You can't think how particular he is."

"Indeed I can, Alix; I am quite in awe of him sometimes. But I see how it came about. Dr. Weston, dear man, has told your father that you really ought to have a cheerful companion."

"I suppose so. I remember he said so before father took me to Paris. Oh, if I had only known you then, Ranee; if I had had any one to help me and be kind to me!" And then she hastily turned her face aside to hide the tears that suddenly sprang to her eyes.

The luncheon-bell startled them both, and Ranee went downstairs to discuss matters more fully with her sisters.

Vera looked a little lugubrious. "Of course I am delighted that you should have such a treat, Ray dear, but how Sallie and I are to get on without you is more than I can tell."

"We shall be as flat and unwholesome as half-cooked pancakes," observed Sallie, who was sometimes original in her illustrations. "We shall be coming over to Marshlands every other day," Marshlands being the name of the village where the Ashtons lived. It lay about a mile and a half from Godstone Park.

"I am sure Alix will be delighted to see you," re-

turned Ranee, "but I don't believe you could spare the time to come over so often. Oh dear," interrupting herself, "I do hope that I shall not be dreadfully home-sick—and Peter-sick. But of course he will often come over to the Garth."

"I am afraid you are wrong there, Ray. You know Dr. Weston is their doctor." Then Ranee's face grew rather long.

"I quite forgot that. But, all the same, Peter must come and see me; it is only two and a half miles, and what is that to a cyclist? I wonder how long they will expect me to stay—three weeks or a month, I expect."

"Well, I suppose so. Alix will certainly need you until she is all right again. I expect you will be very happy, Ray; the Garth is such a beautiful old place, and you and Alix are such friends. By the bye, what are you going to do about clothes? I am afraid we must not ask Peter for a new frock."

"Certainly not. What an idea, Vera!"

"No, we must not think of such a thing. But you do so want a new frock for best. Under the circumstances, don't you think we might draw out of the Emergency Fund?" But Ranee stamped her foot and frowned.

"Avaunt ye, Satanas! Vera, you wicked, horrid little temptress, how dare you buy frocks out of the Emergency Fund!" And Ranee's tragical air would have done credit to Mrs. Siddons.

"But I can't bear your things not to be nice for the Garth," objected Vera, who always mothered her young sisters. "You have a pretty new blouse for evening, and——" But Ranee refused to enter on the subject.

"Look here, Vera, it is no use spoiling things like

this; I have got to wear my old clothes, and there is not the least use making a trouble of it. By and by I shall be able to get a new summer frock; but I have not more than fifteen shillings left of last quarter's money, and I was saving them for a purpose. I must get a pair of gloves and a bit of chiffon for my hat, and then I shall be quite tidy. Alix will not expect me to be smart." Ranee was dismissing the matter with cheerful philosophy. Like most girls, she loved pretty things, but she had the good sense not to attach too much importance to outward appearance; and, to do them justice, the Holt girls never looked shabby. If they wore their old frocks longer than most people, they always looked tidy in them.

Later that evening Ranee came upon Hannah Burke. She was standing at the passage window watching the sunset. Ranee joined her, and they sat down together on the window-seat.

"I am so glad to have this opportunity of speaking to you," began Hannah, with rather a wistful look at her favourite. "We shall be going different ways the day after to-morrow. It will be strange to be at Wayside again, sitting alone with Tabby and her babies."

"I am afraid you will miss us all very much, Hannah."

"One always misses cheerful faces and kind voices," replied Hannah evasively; "and I have had a happy time here that I shall not soon forget. Miss Ashton wants me to come and see her as often as possible, and Mr. Ashton said something of the same sort to me. He is a very civil-spoken man, Ranee, but I wish it were easier for him to accept a favour from a neighbour."

"How do you mean?" asked Ranee, rather puzzled by this.

"Well, it is difficult to explain. Mr. Ashton is a terribly proud man; I saw that from the first, when he wanted to have a paid nurse in. It frets him to be beholden to me for services that he cannot repay; he would be far more comfortable if he could give me a cheque and done with it. He just hates to feel that I have done him and his daughter a kindness, and that I don't want more than a thank you in return. I feel I pity Mr. Ashton for having such a nature."

"But all the same, one can understand it, Hannah. Of course I know the work has just made you happy and comfortable. You love to feel you are of use to people, that they cannot do without you; and you have grown very fond of Alix."

"You are right," and there was a soft look in Hannah's grey eyes; "you always understand things so quickly, Ranee. Miss Ashton is a dear young lady; she has such loving ways with her, and somehow she never seems quite grown up. But I am a little worried about her; it has struck me once or twice that she has something on her mind. She is not happy, Ranee my dear, and she has got no one to mother her properly." And then Vera joined them, and the talk became general.

The next morning, when Ranee went in for a moment to see how Alix had slept, she was surprised to see her draw a letter from under her pillow in rather a hasty and nervous manner.

"You are going out, I see, Ranee; will you kindly post this for me at the General Post Office? And you can bring me some stamps," raising her voice as Hannah entered the room. "Miss Burke knows where my purse is; she will give you half-a-crown."

"All right," returned Ranee; but she wondered as

she went downstairs why Alix seemed so uneasy. The letter slipped from her grasp, and in picking it up she glanced unconsciously at the superscription. It was addressed to—

Marie Durand
chez Madame Bergère
34 Rue de Malmaison
Paris

Chapter XIV

"A HAUNT OF ANCIENT PEACE"

He was a man of middle age,
In aspect manly, grave, and sage.
Marmion.

Yours is meant for true kindness, shown best at the hour of need.—*The Talisman.*

It was with mixed feelings that Ranee left the Red House that Thursday for her visit to the Garth.

Pleasurable anticipation and a delightful sense of adventure and novelty were largely blended with a certain natural regret at leaving home. Nevertheless, such is youthful human nature, before the first milestone was passed pleasure predominated; for in youth it is the winding road which leads to the unknown that is so alluring, far more than the straight beaten track. There are wonderful possibilities lurking round every corner, a little farther and the summit of the hill will be reached, and the wide-stretching country of Arcadia will open out before the young traveller's eyes, with its sunny slopes and flowery meadows, and its soft mystic

Light that never was, on land or sea.

In later life do the flowers smell quite so sweet, one wonders; the fruits gathered in the orchards of life, are they quite as luscious to the taste as those with which youth fills its lap? It was sad to leave Vera and Sallie,

but how was Ranee to feel dismal when Peter was beside her? And there was the invalid to consider. Besides, how could she help enjoying the smooth motion of the luxurious carriage, as the high-spirited horses carried them so swiftly through Godstone towards the village of Marshlands?

Marshlands had always been a favourite walk with the Holt girls, and they were well acquainted with the exterior of the Garth. It was a picturesque old red brick house set among beautiful orchards, which had given it its name.

The smooth velvety lawns that almost surrounded the Garth were only divided by a low wire fence from the orchards and from the meadows. The fence was so imperceptible that it seemed as though one could step straight from the turf on to the long walks bordered by apple and pear tree. In spring the effect was exquisite in its beauty; for far as eye could see, a mass of pink and white blossom seemed to stretch into the distance, and a little later the ground beneath would be so thickly covered with the fallen blossoms that it looked like snow. And in autumn the orchards were almost as beautiful, as the trees bent under their load of golden and ruddy fruit—"the Garden of Hesperides," as Ranee afterwards called them; and it was her great delight to lose herself in the aisles of fruit trees, which seemed to cross and recross so endlessly.

Mr. Ashton and Flossie were at the door to receive them. He welcomed Ranee gravely, but with an air of greater friendliness than he had yet shown: then his attention was given to his daughter. There was no want of fatherly tenderness in his manner as he helped her out of the carriage.

"I am glad to have you back, my dear," he said affectionately. And then, when Alix was comfortably settled on the couch in the drawing-room, Mrs. Binney came in to greet her mistress, while Flossie, who seemed almost beside herself with joy, lavished tokens of affection that almost overwhelmed Alix.

Meanwhile, Ranee was gazing round her with delight; never had she seen a house so quaint and yet so beautiful.

The Garth was an old house, and the several owners in making sundry improvements had been careful not to modernise it.

The rooms were large, but all the ceilings were low-pitched, and the heavy mullioned windows, with their small panes of glass, gave less light than the ordinary plate-glass. Every room had its low cushioned window-seat and quaint ingle-nook, and all the sitting-rooms had small square anterooms—one or two with glass doors leading to the garden. There was a delightful irregularity about the plan of the house that was rather embarrassing to visitors. Every room and every anteroom had one or two steps either leading up or coming down into the room—one could never be sure which. For example, two broad steps led down to the dining-room, but there were three steps to ascend to the drawing-room. A little winding passage and two more steps led to Mr. Ashton's special sanctum, and an odd little spiral staircase that no one else used ended at his bedroom door. The other upstairs rooms were reached by a beautiful old oak staircase, with low, broad steps so slippery with age and polish that Peter eyed them dubiously.

"Miss Ashton will never be able to come down these stairs," he observed; but Mr. Ashton only smiled.

"I shall carry her, of course," he said quietly. "I have done so before now; have I not, Alix? And if I am not in the way Walton is a handy fellow and as strong as a horse." But even with this assurance Peter did not seem quite satisfied.

"These floors are very beautiful," he continued, "but I fear Miss Ashton will use her crutches with difficulty on them. I should not like her to move about the room without some one beside her—it would never do to risk a fall."

"I will be careful—indeed I will, Dr. Holt," returned Alix, who overheard this. "Ranee will be always with me, you know, and I shall not be very long on crutches."

Ranee had heard little of this. She was standing at the window admiring the tender tints of the leafage under the soft blue sky. She only roused herself with difficulty when Mr. Ashton joined her.

"Oh, how beautiful it all is!" she said a little breathlessly; and half to herself she murmured, "a haunt of ancient peace."

"What was that you said, Miss Holt?" and Mr. Ashton looked a little surprised and curious.

"Oh, it was only some lines by Tennyson," returned Ranee, colouring as though embarrassed. "Don't you remember?" But he shook his head.

"Shakespeare and Milton are the only poets I can safely quote; but I should like to hear the words you mean." And then rather shyly Ranee repeated them:

> "An English home; gray twilight pour'd
> On dewy pastures, dewy trees;
> . . . all things in order stood,
> A haunt of ancient peace."

Mr. Ashton listened attentively. He was evidently struck with the lines. Then the old impassive expression returned.

"Poets take things too much for granted," he said rather curtly. "But I must call your attention to the fact that Mrs. Binney is pouring out tea for us, and that we may as well have it;" and then he wheeled up an easy-chair for her, and put a little table beside her, and Peter brought her a cup of tea and some delicious cake.

But a little later Mr. Ashton returned to the subject of his own accord.

"I am afraid you thought me a little abrupt just now," he said, sitting down beside her; "but the fact is I am a terribly prosaic person. It always seems to me, as I said before, that these fine poets so often sacrifice truth to mere imagery—that they take things for granted. All things 'in order stood,' may be true, and yet the home may not be a 'haunt of ancient peace.'" He said this with a grave, inscrutable smile, which Ranee instinctively felt marked some deep feeling. Then his manner changed, and he said quickly, "But I am glad you like the Garth. Alix and I are very fond of the old place."

"Oh, no wonder!" returned Ranee enthusiastically. "I was thinking as I stood by the window how those orchards would look on a spring morning—the dewy freshness and the lovely blossoms, and the little birds in their nests."

"You are right," he returned calmly, "there is certainly a wonderful charm in a spring dawn. I have noticed it often."

"And then on a moonlight night," continued Ranee, "it must be still more beautiful then—like a white forest, one can imagine that."

"I see you have a vivid imagination," observed Mr. Ashton. "You remind me of Alix. She once told me that she could hardly tear herself away from the window on a moonlight evening, because the orchards were like an embodied fairy tale to her. Alix shares your poetical fancies, Miss Holt. I am afraid she does worse—that she dabbles in rhyme herself."

"And of course you think us both very foolish," returned Ranee, with a touch of petulance in her voice; for Mr. Ashton's tolerant smile did not quite please her.

"No, indeed; I only think you both very young;" and here he sighed slightly. "There was a time when I had my daydreams too, but life soon knocks that sort of thing out of a man. Now I see your brother is looking towards us, as though he wishes to speak to me. Will you excuse me a moment?"

Mr. Ashton was right in his surmise. Peter had noticed that the invalid looked weary and a little sad, and was anxious to have her taken to her room at once, as any more talk and excitement would give her a bad night.

While this was being accomplished, Mrs. Binney proposed to show Ranee to her room, that she might unpack before dinner. To the girl's surprise they went up the spiral staircase. "It will be a short cut, and we shall not be in the Doctor's way," the housekeeper said apologetically; "though I am bound to say no one but the master ever uses it. To my mind it is an awkward, twisty corkscrew of a staircase. But Mr. Ashton seems to have a fancy for it—even gentlemen have their fads. But in my opinion the oak staircase is a deal safer." Mrs. Binney panted a little as she stopped to get her breath. She was a stout, comely dame, and was evidently a very faithful and devoted retainer of the family.

The same curious irregularity was noticeable in the per floor, and the passage leading from the spiral stair- se being rather dark, Ranee nearly pitched head fore- ost into the bedroom, as she did not see the two steps, d only saved herself by a jerk backward. Mrs. Binney ught her by the arm. "Dear me, ma'am, I ought to ve warned you, for you might have slipped and rained your ankle. But there are steps everywhere, you will be finding out for yourself, and the pas- ges, as I tell the master, are like tunnels for dark- ss."

"It is a very interesting old house, Mrs. Binney; and hat a delightful room you have given me!"

"Miss Alix wished you to have the room next to hers. ou see there is only the wardrobe-room between, as we ll it. That's her door opening into it." And then anee peeped into the small anteroom, which was fitted p with dark presses and carved oak chests. She could ear voices from the adjoining room, and a minute later eter came in search of her, and Mrs. Binney at once ithdrew.

"I must be going now," he observed. "Well, Ra," oking round the room admiringly, "you seem in luck's ay. I am afraid all this will spoil you for the Red louse."

"Isn't it a sweet old room!" exclaimed Ranee, who as enraptured with the quaintness of the arrangements. wide step led to a sort of alcove, where the bed was laced. There was a long slit of a window, with a prie- ieu and tall carved chair beside it. Another wide step d to a sort of recess, with a large mullioned window nd long cushioned seat and small writing-table. The ressing-table and wardrobe were of heavy Spanish ma-

hogany. The room was large, but the low ceiling apparently detracted from the size.

"This must be what they call "The Lady's Wing," continued Peter. "This was probably Mrs. Ashton's room, and they have given it you that you two girls may be together. Your doors both open into the wardrobe-room, and you can almost talk across it. You won't be nervous, Ra? I don't believe the Garth is haunted."

"Of course not. I never thought of such a thing. But, Peter," catching him rather nervously by the coat-sleeve, "shall I be olbiged to dine along with Mr. Ashton? Such an idea never occurred to me;" and Ranee looked distressed.

"I am afraid there is no help for it, my dear," returned Peter. "He is not a bad sort of fellow, Ra, when he thaws a bit, and he is a gentleman, you know. I would have stayed if I could, but Dr. Weston has asked me to look in at Godstone Park as I come home—little Miss Bernardine is ailing. Now, cheer up, little 'un. Dr. Weston will be round to-morrow, and I will promise to look you up in a day or two." And Peter patted her in a reassuring way and called her a little goose, and then bade her an affectionate good-bye. Ranee longed to go back with him, but she had no time to indulge in useless tremours and regrets; her box must be unpacked and she must change her dress and go to Alix. But not all her assumed jauntiness could hide the truth from her friend.

"I am so sorry, Ranee, dear," she said at once. "Dr. Holt insisted on my going to bed, and now you will have to dine alone with father."

"I suppose I could not stay with you, Alix?" rather wistfully. For once in her life Ranee was in what school-

boys would term "an awful funk." It was no joke dining alone with "a grey, monumental man."

"I am afraid that would never do," replied Alix gravely. "Father would not like it; it hurts him if he thinks people are afraid of him; and he really means to be kind, you know."

"Then I suppose I must do it;" but Ranee heaved such a tremendous sigh that Alix laughed.

"Oh, it will soon be over; dinners at the Garth are never long affairs, you know. Father generally takes the dogs out afterwards, and you can come up to me if you like; there is no need to go into the drawing-room. I will tell Mrs. Binney that you will have your coffee up here. By the bye, how do you like your room, Ranee? It was mother's room, you know."

"I think it is lovely. That cushioned seat and the window looking over the orchard are so delightful. I think I like it better than this"—looking round the cosy, well-furnished room, with its dainty appointments. With the exception of the window-seat and quaint fireplace, the room was far more up-to-date.

"Oh, I would not change my old room for any in the house," returned Alix. "It used to be the nursery in the old days, and then I asked father to let me have it for a bedroom. We call this the Lady's Wing, Ranee. You have the Dame's Room, as it has always been named, and the wardrobe-room used to be the Dame's closet. Mine has always been known as the Angel Room, probably from the carved angels that support the mantelpiece. Those old brackets have angel heads, too. Oh, there is the gong, Ranee, and I must ring for Binney to take you down, for you will never find your way alone to the dining-room."

There were no tunnel-like passages on this side of the house, for Alix's room opened on a wide corridor leading to the beautiful oak staircase.

To Ranee's surprise, Mr. Ashton was waiting in the hall for her. He was in evening-dress, and she was struck by his distinguished bearing. He was undoubtedly a very fine-looking man, though he could hardly be termed handsome, his features were too irregular and rugged.

"We must keep each other company this evening," he said pleasantly, as he led the way into the dining-room—a fine old room, full of family portraits. The dinner-table, with its silver and glass and well-filled flower vases, looked imposing to Ranee's unaccustomed eyes, while the staid, grey-haired butler was almost as formidable as his master. Probably Mr. Ashton was human enough to guess the girl's secret embarrassment, for he quite laid aside his grave reserve and talked to her about the Garth and its surroundings in a way that would have surprised Alix if she could have heard him. And Ranee who had felt at first as though every mouthful would choke her, and could hardly swallow the food on her plate for intense nervousness, was first interested and then carried out of herself by the curious old stories he told her—legends and anecdotes of bygone Ashtons; indeed, she was almost sorry when Walton brought in his master's cup of coffee, thus giving her a pretext to withdraw.

"You are going up to Alix now?" observed Mr. Ashton, as he opened the door for her. "I will wish you good-night, then, for I shall be going out shortly. You will not let Alix tire herself too much with talking?"

"Oh no, I will be very careful. Thank you so much

telling me all those interesting things"—and Ranee ted up in his face shyly; she was really very grateful him for putting her at her ease.

Oh, I have not exhausted my budget," he replied, ing. "I am glad you like these queer old legends; t is devoted to them. I hope you will sleep well, Miss t." And then, with a touch of grave humour, he ed, "You certainly ought to rest well in 'a house ncient peace.'"

Chapter XV

ROGER ASHTON'S WORKSHOP

Is there anything more touching and pathetic in the history of man than to see how absolutely, without exception, the men and women who start out with only the need of tasks, of duties, of something which can call out their powers, and of the smile of God stimulating and encouraging them—how they all come, one by one, certainly up to the place in life where they need consolation?—PHILLIPS BROOKS.

A PRETTY pink shaded lamp rather dimly illuminated the Angel Room, and as Ranee sat down by the bed Alix's face was so indistinct that she suggested lighting the candles on the toilet-table; but to her surprise Alix objected to this.

"I don't care for more light," she said, a little wearily "my eyes are rather weak to-night, and the semi-darkness rests them. I want to know how you got on with father, Ranee; you have been such a long, long time. When Binney took away my tray, she said she could hear voices as she passed the dining-room, and that they sounded quite cheerful."

"Well, it was not so dreadful after all," returned Ranee, with an apologetic laugh. "Mr. Ashton was very kind; I think he saw I was nervous, and he told me such amusing stories that I quite forgot myself. Indeed, I was so interested that the time seemed quite short."

"Father knew all about it," returned Alix; "very little escapes him, and he guessed how strange and shy you

felt. He does not tell every one those stories, Ranee; he generally keeps them for me. I expect he told you about Dame Marjory and her cat?"

"Oh yes; and the twin brothers Roger and Geoffrey Ashton, who wanted to go to the Crusades when they were six years old, and dressed themselves up in armour, and nearly frightened the old lodge-keeper into a fit, one moonlight night. And how they were discovered in the churchyard at Godstone, nearly dead with cold and fatigue."

"Oh, that is my favourite story. Poor little lads. But Geoffrey never got over the effects of the chill he got that night. Roger was a soldier when he grew up, and fought under Marlborough. Father is writing a sort of chronicle of the Garth and the Ashtons. He means to have it printed for private circulation; he thinks it will be so interesting. Father is not a bit literary, but he loves hunting up old legends and brasses; he has got such a lot of curious old things that he hoards in his den. I daresay that he will show them to you some day."

"Oh, do you think he will?"

"I have not a doubt of it—if you behave pretty—as old nurse used to say. And then he carves so beautifully. He has a regular workshop, and makes all sorts of beautiful things. He often says that if he had been a working man he would always have taken good wages. When I come downstairs I will show you the table and chair he carved last year; they are in the morning-room."

"He must be very clever," observed Ranee thoughtfully, and then she checked herself. She would willingly have gone on talking, but it was evident to her that Alix was fatigued, and that she spoke with effort.

"You are very tired, Alix dear, and I am going to

leave you to rest," she said affectionately. But thou
Alix could not deny this, she seemed unwilling to
her go.

"It is so early," she objected, "only half-past eig
What will you do, Ranee?"

"I shall go to my room and write to Vera, and the
shall read until I am sleepy, and then I shall go to b
There is a book-case in my room, I see."

"There are books in every room," returned Al
"Well, perhaps you are right, dear. Father will be s
to come up presently to bid me good-night. You
leave the door open if you like, and then I shall feel
lonely. I hope you will not be dull, sitting all by yo
self in the Dame's Room." But Ranee stoutly negati
this.

The letter to Vera took some time, there was so m
to say, even in these few hours of absence, and she kn
how she and Sallie would delight in her word-pictu
she was just finishing a lengthy postcript when she he
Mr. Ashton's voice, and softly closed her door—but
did not remain long.

Ranee was getting sleepy now, and the bed in the
cove, with the lavender-scented sheets, was distin
inviting; but before she laid her head on the pillow,
stole across the wardrobe-room to see if Alix were c
fortable.

There was only a night-light burning now, and Ra
could hardly grope her way to the bed.

"I am not asleep, Ranee," whispered Alix. "Go
night, dear; it was kind of you to come." Then Ra
who had stooped to kiss her, drew back quickly.

"Why, your face is wet, Alix! You are crying, de
Is there anything the matter? Do you feel ill?"

lo, no, it is nothing; I am only a little weak and
It is very babyish of me, but I cannot help it.
e, please, go back to your room." Alix's voice had
vish note in it, and Ranee was obliged to withdraw.
erhaps it was natural," she said to herself. Alix
xhausted and overwrought, and she was evidently
f those persons who found tears a relief; but a
nt later the remembrance of Hannah Burke's words
red to her. She had owned herself somewhat per-
l about her. "She is not happy, Ranee my dear,
he has no one to mother her." Hannah had been
her night and day for three weeks, and had had
of opportunity for observation.

haps it was as well for her own peace of mind that
knew nothing of what passed in the Angel Room
long wakeful hours, the stifled sobs, as Alix buried
ce in the pillow, until outraged nature revolted, and
and weary she fell into an exhausted sleep. Yes,
ps it was as well Ranee guessed none of these
.

x continued low and ailing the next two or three
and Dr. Weston advised her remaining quietly in
wn room until she had recovered from the fatigue
journey.

ee devoted herself to her amusement, and read
lked to her as she felt inclined. When Alix seemed
ed for quiet she took solitary rambles in the lanes
Marshlands, or wandered about the orchards weav-
easant daydreams for herself and Vera and Sallie.
ever saw Mr. Ashton except at meals, and her
gs were always spent with Alix. Mr. Ashton was
s considerate and courteous, and though there were
re amusing stories told, and he was often a little

half-an-hour before my ho
pleased assent evidently grati

The library was a large rc
occupied by book-cases. Cab
description filled up every av
brasses and fragments of fo
weapons literally covered the
The furniture was of dark c
gruous objects gave an air of
man in armour with closed vi
ton's special chair, and a tiger
lay before the fireplace. A
of a blind beggar and his dat
occupied the window recess.

"Well, what do you think
looked round her in astonishe
old curiosity shop, eh?"

"It is a beautiful room, and
returned; "but I should not l
armour behind my chair. I
rather eerie. I should fancy
itself out and that gauntleted l

whom I have a great respect, Roger Ashton—my own namesake, you see—who fell at Cressy, fighting bravely beside his prince. I am no believer in ghosts, Miss Holt; and even if any haunt the Garth, which I am disposed to doubt, I am sure even an Ashton ghost would treat his descendant with courtesy." Mr. Ashton spoke with such quiet decision that Ranee quickly dropped the subject.

The door leading to the workshop was concealed by a hanging of beautiful tapestry. As they passed through, Ranee found herself surrounded by objects of interest, curious things that Mr. Ashton had picked up abroad. There was a carved oak pulpit he had found in a curiosity shop in Bruges. Some of the figures were broken, but one or two were in perfect preservation. Some painted panels and a carved oak angel were evidently ecclesiastical work; a grotesque gargoyle with wings and a Satanic countenance leered in the background. A table and chair and a lathe, and a bench or two, were the only articles of furniture.

Ranee's attention was attracted by an oval frame half finished on the table; the design was simple but very effective—oak leaves and acorns.

"Oh, what beautiful work! If only Sallie could see that!" she exclaimed. Mr. Ashton seemed amused at her naïve admiration.

"That is your younger sister, is it not? If I am in when she comes to see you, I shall be very pleased to show her my workshop. I do very little work in the summer. In winter I spend a good deal of time carpentering or carving. I have another room down the passage where I do all rough work. This sort of thing is my hobby, you see."

"But how do you find time for everything?" asked Ranee. She had already discovered that the master of the Garth was a very busy person indeed. He had a large farm which he superintended himself, though he kept a working bailiff under him, and he was a Justice of the Peace.

"I am an early riser," he returned quietly; "I am often at work for a couple of hours before breakfast."

"But you have no time for reading, surely?"

"I generally read and write in the evening when I come in from my evening prowl or after Alix has gone to bed. I rarely retire before midnight. I do not need as much sleep as most men. I am sorry to hurry you, Miss Holt, but I hear Morton's voice in the passage;" and then Ranee thanked him and hurried off.

She was deeply impressed by all she had seen. Mr. Ashton's energy seemed inexhaustible. Surely with all those occupations and interests he ought to be a happy man, and yet Ranee instinctively felt that this was not the case.

Hannah Burke was their first visitor. She came over the next afternoon, and remained some time. Alix was unfeignedly pleased to see her, and she made Ranee take her down into the drawing-room to tea.

Hannah evidently enjoyed her visit. "It is so nice to see you again," she said almost affectionately, as they sat down together on the low window-seat. "I am ashamed to say how much I have missed you both. Miss Ashton is looking poorly; I am afraid she has been fretting again." But Hannah looked grave when Ranee told her about the wet cheek she had kissed the previous night. "There is trouble of some kind, my dear," she returned thoughtfully. "It is not natural for a young

creature of her age to lie brooding and thinking as she does. Get her to talk to you. She has no sister, and even the best of fathers can't guess what goes on in a girl's heart. Perhaps there's some one for whom she cares, and things have gone cross, or maybe her father has put his foot down. He is a dour man, Roger Ashton, they say."

"Oh, but he is so fond of Alix," returned Ranee; "he gives her everything she wants, and I am quite sure they are devoted to each other."

"Maybe you are right, Ranee my dear; but all the same she is afraid of him. I hate to say it, for I really am very fond of the poor child, but I don't think she is quite open with him."

"Oh, Hannah, what do you mean?" exclaimed Ranee in a shocked voice. But Hannah refused to explain; it was only a word or two, a mere trifle she said, not worth repeating, but it had given her the idea.

"Try and win her confidence," she went on. "She has taken a fancy to you, Ranee, and perhaps some day she will tell you what is wrong with her, and you will be able to help her." And then Hannah, who was evidently unwilling to say more on the subject, began talking of her own affairs. "I want to tell you how kind your brother has been," she said rather abruptly. "I was talking to him about my loneliness, and wish to find useful work, and he said he would bear it in mind. And this morning he came round quite early and asked me if I would like to visit a young girl with spinal complaint. Her people are poor but respectable; her sister is a housemaid at Wynyards; Rebecca Colwyn is the name of the girl, and she lives in Bennoch Lane."

"Oh yes, I know," replied Ranee; "she is a patient

of Dr. Weston's, and Margaret often visits her; they are very much interested in her."

"I went round at once," continued Hannah. "It is a sad case, my dear. Rebecca is quite young, not more than nineteen or twenty I expect, and she is a great sufferer. They are poor, as I said, and the mother, who is a widow, goes out charing, and there is no one but a child of twelve to look after her all day. She is in such a dull back room too. But they have no other to give her; they do their best, poor things. But Mrs. Colwyn has to work hard to keep the little home together."

"Yes, I know, and Margaret says that Annie gives her mother half her wages. They are excellent people, Hannah. So you mean to visit poor Rebecca?"

"Yes, my dear, I shall make her my work. I shall go and put her comfortable every morning; for though Sophy is a handy child, she has her lessons to do, and you can't expect her to know much about nursing at that age. It is dreadful to think of the poor thing lying there all those hours with nothing to take off the pain. She told me herself how she longed for her mother to come back. 'But sometimes mother is so tired out with the day's work that she sits and cries instead of talking to me'—she actually said that."

"Oh dear, what a life!" sighed Ranee.

"Yes, it is cruelly hard, as she says. But I am going to do what I can for her; I can make her comfortable, and tidy up the room, and sit with her a bit; and I can find her some books, for she is fond of reading. Miss Weston comes to her for an hour once or twice a week; and Dr. Holt, who has taken up the case for Dr. Weston, said no doubt his sisters would be glad to help. And I

think between us we can bring some comfort to the poor soul."

"Yes, indeed. I am so glad Peter told you about her; I know how good you are, Hannah."

"No, my dear, not good—we are none of us that; but I want to do something for my fellow-creatures, and I shall be all the happier now I have some one beside myself to think about"—and Hannah's face brightened as she spoke. But Ranee looked a little grave when she went back to Alix.

"I wish I were more like her," she said rather dejectedly as she sat down. "She makes one feel so small and worldly. I never knew before how selfish I was."

"Oh, what nonsense, Ranee! But Hannah Burke is certainly very nice."

"She is more than nice—she has a lovely character; one can see that she is so absolutely selfless; she is never thinking of her own comfort, but only how she can help other people. I like to help too, but I always think of myself first," finished Ranee, with a deprecative laugh.

Margaret Weston had once told her that she was glad to know that Ranee did not often indulge in introspection. "For you do nothing by halves," she said smiling, "and your repentance would be something tremendous. But you are a healthy-minded little animal, Ray, and your soul does not trouble you unduly." But Ranee had been rather affronted at this plain speaking on her friend's part. Like most people she had her bad moments when she was discontented with herself. At such times she was very prone to exalt the virtues of others and to depreciate herself.

Chapter XVI

"I DON'T BELIEVE IN DARK ANGELS"

A full rich world that o'erbrims with gladness
And beauty and sweetness, for you and me;
A young bright world, with no sign of sadness
Traced on its brow that our eye can see.
A world to love in,
A world to rove in,
From morn till eve, with the bird and bee.
HELEN MARION BURNSIDE.

RANEE soon became accustomed to her new environments; and when Alix was well enough to join them at meals, her only source of embarrassment was removed, and she settled down happily enough.

The Garth was a pleasant abode on these sunny June days, and Ranee loved to wander in the orchards in the early morning. It seemed to her, as she strolled under the low mossy apple trees, as though the world of men were only just waking up to their labours, and that she and the birds had it all to themselves. How she loved the crisp freshness of the air and the glimpses of soft blue sky through the leafy branches! She would wet her feet in the dewy grass in her eager search for nests. The thrushes and blackbirds were busy with their nurseries, and the cooing of the wood-pigeons sounded from the plantation behind the orchard. Mr. Ashton one morning saw her running across the lawn with Flossie frolicking round her, and waited to administer a word of reproof.

"This is hardly wise, Miss Holt; the dews are heavy this morning. You should keep to the gravel paths."

"Oh, my shoes are thick; I can easily change them before breakfast," returned Ranee. "There is a thrush's nest near those Guelder roses, quite low down; I could see the little mother's bright eyes as I peeped through the shrubs. What a lovely morning! How delicious it all is! I think one ought to be grateful just to be alive on such a day. Oh, there is the gong, and I must fly."

"And Alix will be waiting for me to carry her downstairs," observed Mr. Ashton, as he followed her into the house. But as he went up to his daughter's room he was thinking of Ranee's words.

"What a bright young creature she is," he said to himself; "how perfectly sane in mind as well as healthy in body. Oh, if only Alix were more like her! If he could hear such a speech from her lips, 'I think one ought to be grateful to be alive on such a day!' How joyously she had said those words, and what a happy light there had been in her eyes! If only Alix had this keen enjoyment of little things." Of course one must allow for temperament," he thought; but it seemed to him that Alix's spirits were strangely variable of late. It had been a wise move on his part to secure this cheerful companion for her, and it would not be his fault if Miss Holt's visit to The Garth were not a long one.

"Your sister brightens us all up," he said to Peter when he paid his first friendly visit. "She has a wonderful flow of spirits—what our French neighbours would call *gaité de cœur;* her society will be very good for my little girl;" and Mr. Ashton smiled in a satisfied manner as he spoke.

As soon as Alix was strong enough to bear the fatigue,

she and Ranee took long drives; and when the former became more accustomed to her crutches they spent a good deal of their time in the garden and orchard, and this was a source of enjoyment to Ranee, who loved to be out in the open air. Not a day passed without some visitor to the Garth. When Dr. Weston came to see his patient he often brought his daughter with him, and Ranee was always delighted to see her old friend. Hannah Burke came constantly, but she never remained long and Vera and Sallie came every few days. Alix always welcomed them with unfeigned pleasure. Their most frequent visitor was Mrs. Lugard; she would drive up at all sorts of unexpected hours, just as it suited her fancy or convenience; sometimes quite early in the morning, or so late in the afternoon, that the dressing-bell sounded, and Alix was obliged to hurry her away. Often, too, Bear would appear on the lawn in her little wheeled chair, her faithful henchman, Gavin, propelling her; and Ranee, who, like Vera, was a child-lover, soon grew very fond of the little creature. But Bear, though she was always gracious and friendly, remained loyal to her first favourite, Vera.

When Ranee had been a week at the Garth, Vera and Sallie came over one afternoon. They were visibly excited. They were to have tea at Godstone Park on the following afternoon. Mrs. Lugard had written such a friendly little note to Vera. "We have brought it for you to read," continued Sallie; "it is so nice, and she evidently wants to know us; and Peter seems quite pleased for us to go."

"Oh, how charming!" Ranee was always ready with her sympathy. "It seems so selfish to be enjoying myself so awfully in this lovely place unless you two dear

creatures can have your share of good things. I should rather like to be going myself," she added the next moment; "I always wanted to see the house."

Alix seemed amused at Ranee's eagerness. "We will drive over there some afternoon when I am stronger," she said; "Dawtie will love to have us. So you shall soon have your wish;" and Ranee was content with this promise. Alix was so very kind, she thought; she was always trying to give her pleasure. In a hundred little ways she tried to show her gratitude to the good Samaritans who had received her under their roof.

"We will come and tell you how we get on," observed Vera, as Ranee walked down the road with them for a few parting words; "Alix says we are to come as often as we like;" and Ranee nodded happily. She was not really homesick—her life at the Garth was too pleasant to allow regret—but she would have missed her sisters sadly if they had not come so frequently; and she was certainly disappointed when, on the appointed afternoon, Sallie turned up alone.

"Vera was very sorry, and sent her love," announced Sallie with an important air, "but Mrs. Lugard wanted her to drive with her to Milverton, and Bear had gone with them. The groom had brought a note over that morning, and Peter did not wish her to refuse."

"Oh, of course not. How delightful for Vera, and she does so love a long drive. Well, Sallie, hurry up." Ranee's eyes were sparkling in anticipation of Sallie's description.

"It was very nice, Ray, and we enjoyed our afternoon very much, and Mrs. Lugard was as kind and friendly as possible. It is a grand house, of course, and the rooms are all so beautifully furnished and com-

fortable, but I like the Garth best." For Sallie's artistic soul had been smitten by the beauties of the old house; and the day she had been introduced to Roger Ashton's workshop she had shared a little in the feelings of the Queen of Sheba when she saw the magnificence of Solomon—"there was no more spirit in her."

To her simple girlish mind Roger Ashton was a king among men. What was there that his clever hands could not do! Sallie fairly gloated over the wonderful carving. She was far too shy to express her admiration in words, but Mr. Ashton smiled in quite a fatherly way when he saw the little girl's eyes brighten and shine with pleasure.

"Your sister is very intelligent and appreciative," he said afterwards to Ranee, "and though she says little, one can see that she has the true artistic nature." Sallie was very proud and happy when Ranee repeated this speech, for the Holt girls always passed a compliment round to the rightful owner.

Ranee was not at all surprised when Sallie confessed to a preference for the Garth—she had fully expected to hear this—neither was she in the least astonished that Vera did not share this opinion. "Vera likes Godstone Park ever so much better," went on Sallie—"though perhaps I ought not to say so before Alix."

"And why not, my dear; surely the world would be a dull place if we all liked the same things"—and Alix seemed much amused. Little Sallie was always so dreadfully in earnest. "I am quite content that you and Ranee admire it so much. Vera evidently prefers grandeur to cosiness; well, there is no harm in that."

"Vera does love big, high rooms," confessed Sallie. "I could see by the way she was looking about her all tea-time how pleased she was. I am sure Mrs. Lugard

has taken a fancy to her. Oh, there you are smiling again, Alix!"

"Dawtie's sudden fancies for people always amuse me," returned Alix. "Beauty attracts her in the oddest way; and you know Vera is really very pretty and sweet-looking."

"Mrs. Lugard seemed to think so, for she was as nice to her as possible," returned Sallie; "and as for little Bear, she sat quite close to Vera, and every now and then I could see her little hand touching her dress. And the way she talked to her, Vera was quite pleased I could see. And then Sir Heber came in. Mrs. Lugard sent for him, I believe, but that seemed to spoil things somehow."

"Why, I thought you liked Sir Heber so much?" asked Ranee in surprise.

"So I do; but he was ever so much nicer at the lodge. Why, he was quite friendly and pleasant, and we were all as merry as possible. But yesterday he was so different; it was as though he had forgotten he had ever known us, he was so stiff and silent. I don't think he wanted to come, but Mrs. Lugard sent him such a pressing message."

"Sir Heber is always very quiet when his sister is in the room," observed Alix; "I have often noticed it myself."

"But why, Alix?"

"It is rather difficult to explain. I believe he is fond of her, and I know he is very good to her and Bear, but all the same she has a repressive influence over him."

"I think I understand what you mean," returned Sallie. "Mrs. Lugard made teasing little speeches now and then, and Sir Heber seemed to draw into his shell."

"Exactly so. I believe it is only fun on Dawtie's part; but she is a little dense and injudicious in the way she treats him. He is a shy, awkward man, and he certainly never appears to good advantage when Dawtie is in the room. You know," turning to Ranee, "we see a good deal of him at the Garth. He often walks over and sits with father in the workshop; he likes to see him carve, and father always finds him good company."

"But he has not been lately, Alix."

"Indeed he has, dear. He was here the day before yesterday; Binney told me so. We do not always see him in the drawing-room, unless father brings him in for some tea, and then he always makes himself pleasant. I shall tell Binney to let me know the next time he comes, and then you can judge for yourself. I think you will form a better impression of him here than in his own house."

Alix kept her word, and a few days after this conversation, as Ranee was assisting her to cross the lawn to the shady corner where Walton had arranged the tea-table, they saw Mr. Ashton come out of the house followed by a short dark man who Ranee immediately guessed was Sir Heber Maxwell, and the next moment she found her conjecture was right.

It was hardly to be expected that Ranee would be prepossessed by Sir Heber's appearance; indeed, she shared Vera's first impression, that he was the most ordinary and plebeian-looking person she had ever met. In fact, it was a complete disillusion, for beside Mr. Ashton's fine presence and stately dignity Sir Heber certainly did not show to advantage. He was evidently quite at his ease, however, and disposed to make himself pleasant, and there was none of that abruptness of man-

ner that Vera had noticed at the lodge. This afternoon he was in congenial society which suited him.

After a time Ranee became more accustomed to his outward peculiarities, and gave him credit for his good points. He was not well dressed, but he looked a gentleman, and there was a certain quiet dignity, as though he could assert himself if he chose, and his expression was very kindly at times. Ranee liked his voice too. "If I could only have listened to him with my eyes closed," she said to Alix afterwards, "I should have thought him quite nice."

"Oh, you will not think him so plain when you know him better," was Alix's answer to this. "There have been times when I thought him quite handsome; and I know Bear admires him. For she told me once that 'Uncle Heber was a lovely man, and beautiful enough for an angel;'" and then they both laughed heartily at Bear's childish notion of an angel.

"I don't believe in dark angels," observed Ranee, when she had recovered from her mirth and had voice to speak. "'I am sure they are always fair." But Alix refused to admit this. But they were very merry at poor Sir Heber's expense, and that evening Alix was in such good spirits that Mr. Ashton seemed quite pleased, and remained in the drawing-room longer than his wont, as though the sight of the two bright young faces had a charm for him.

Alix had arranged to drive over to Godstone Park the following afternoon. She had become accustomed to her crutches, and was making such good progress that she hoped soon to discard them, and with a little help it was possible for her to pay the call. Her father had desired Walton to accompany them, and assist her in and

out of the carriage. "I can always manage on level ground," she observed to Ranee, "and the floors at God—stone are not slippery like ours. They have thick carpets everywhere, except on the tesselated pavement of the hall."

Ranee was inwardly much excited, for she longed to see this charming Mrs. Lugard at home, and she had a curiosity to see the inside of the house. She had often walked up to the grand old avenue when the family had been absent, and she was well acquainted with the exterior of the imposing grey stone house, with its wide spreading wings and handsome portico. There was a certain venerable air of age about it, though it had not the picturesque beauty of the Garth. Once when Margaret Weston had been with her, Jenny Drayton had asked her husband to take them round the gardens, and they had seen the hot-houses and the rosery and the kitchen-garden, with its pear-tree walk and high red walls covered with fruit trees; crimson peaches and nectarines, and yellow apricots and mellow greengages, hanging in dainty profusion, a perfect feast of colour, in the ripening sunshine.

"Oh, I like this best, Maggie!" Ranee had exclaimed, looking with admiring eyes at the borders of herbaceous flowers that grew in sweet confusion—tall rose-red and claret-coloured hollihocks, mingled with the sapphire and turquoise blue of delphiniums, and great bushes of Michaelmas daisies and fragrant lavender. "Those shady lawns were beautiful, and of course the rosery is charming, but this walled-in old garden is most to my taste."

"You have not seen my favourite nook yet," returned Margaret. "You need not go with us, Gavin, I know

the way well. It is such a quaint little place, Ranee, and is called the Crow's Nest; that little green door in the wall leads to it."

The name suited it well, Ranee declared afterwards, for it was certainly like a nest. There was a cup-shaped hollow, with smooth grassy banks so slippery to climb that a few steps had been cut in the turf, and round it was a grass walk, with one or two stone benches built into the wall. It was such a silent little green place, and as Ranee sat down on the bench, she could see nothing but the wall before her and waving tree-tops, for the Godstone woods began here.

"Well, do you like it?" Margaret asked, but she was quite sure beforehand of Ranee's answer.

"Like it! I think the Crow's Nest is perfectly lovely; it is so peaceful, everything seems outside, the trees and the flowers and the birds, one might dream dreams here, Maggie;" and there was a wistful look in the girl's eye as she spoke.

Chapter XVII

BEAR AND HER FRIENDS

I told her a story of flowers and fairies,
And varied expressions swept over her face,
While gravely she followed my fancy's vagaries,
Her arms round my neck in a childish embrace.
" So clever, so clever," the little one thought me,
Her praises were lavish, her kisses were free,
And " Tell me a story," she often besought me,
" For no one tells stories like you, dear," said she.

HELEN MARION BURNSIDE.

RANEE was in such spirits as they set off for Godstone Park that Alix felt the cheering influence, and became herself mildly exhilarated. The sunshine, the fragrance of the June flowers, pleasant companionship, and a delightful sense of returning strength seemed to infuse new life into her languid frame. Whatever secret burden oppressed her was laid aside, and she listened to Ranee's light-hearted chatter with a brighter expression than her young face had worn for many a long day. For there is nothing so infectious as cheerfulness. As Shakespeare says, " A merry heart goes all the day, your sad tires in a mile-a," and there is much sweetness of wisdom unfolded in the quaint old words.

For it is an undoubted fact that a sunny nature, that looks on the bright side of things, has a greater influence than a whole ream of written sermons. Gouldburn tells us that a devotional writer of the present day, in answer

to the question: How are we to overcome temptation? says, "Cheerfulness is the first thing, cheerfulness is the second, and cheerfulness is the third," and there is deep truth in this. For if we carry our own atmosphere with us, it is surely an unwholesome and pitiful thing to choke our neighbours with the dull mist and fogs of our own disordered fancies. Rather let us cultivate cheerfulness, as an old saint bids us, that those who love us may bask in reflected sunshine.

The drive was a short one, and as Ranee stood in the portico waiting for Alix to adjust her crutches, she had leisure to look round her. The circular hall at Godstone Park was the great feature of the house. A gallery ran round it, and some of the bedrooms opened upon this. There were two staircases, which led to a wide landing and then branched off in different directions.

The hall, which was very spacious, seemed a receptacle for all sorts of curiosities, but it was evidently not used as a living room. The publicity of the gallery overhead, and the draughts from so many doors and windows would have hindered all comfort, so the family portraits had hitherto had it to themselves.

As Alix slowly made her way down the wide corridor leading to the drawing-room, Mrs. Lugard came out to meet her. "You are delightfully punctual, my dear child," she said, in her crisp, bright way, "and I am so glad to see you, and Ranee too;" for Mrs. Lugard, who was an extremely unconventional person, had become exceedingly friendly with the Holt girls, and called them by their Christian names. "I think 'Miss' is so mawkish and absurd between people who mean to be good friends," and Ranee had felt much flattered by this.

Mrs. Lugard looked her best that afternoon; she was

beautifully dressed as usual, and her dainty toilette of muslin and lace was evidently the work of a Parisian artiste. She had a pretty figure, and looked a mere girl in the soft shaded light.

The drawing-room at Godstone Park was a charming room; it was very long and lofty, but the furniture was so arranged that all sorts of cosy nooks and corners had been formed, screened off by tall palms. The windows opened on the terrace, where a peacock was preening his feathers on the sundial. In a shady corner of the lawn Bear was sitting on a low wicker chair, and Gavin Drayton was seated on the grass beside her. He was evidently repairing her doll's perambulator; the waxen baby was in its little mother's arms.

Ranee looked at them longingly. "May I go and speak to Bernardine, Mrs. Lugard?" she asked.

"My dear Ranee, what a question! This is Liberty Hall, and every one does as he or she likes here. But is not the sun too hot?" But Ranee denied this.

In spite of her enjoyment of Mrs. Lugard's society, she had a secret craving to see the Crow's Nest again. Mrs. Lugard, as she knew, seldom visited any part of the garden except the tennis ground and croquet lawn. She said the midges were so troublesome. She never enjoyed tea out of doors for fear of caterpillars falling into her tea-cup. She had fished out a small green one one day, and the melancholy suicide had filled her with disgust. "A tea-table by an open window is far nicer," she would say. "I never will give in to Heber's and Bear's fancy for *al fresco* meals. I believe that they intend to have tea in the Crow's Nest the next time I am out, but I have privately begged Collins to let them use only common china, for James is so careless, and I fully expect

he and the tea-tray will come to grief, the grass is so slippery."

Bear's sweet little face brightened when she saw Ranee. "Oh, do sit down," she said coaxingly; "the grass is so nice and warm, Gavin says. My baby has had an accident, and she is so frightened, poor darling, that she won't open her eyes. We were in the Crow's Nest, and the pram went down the bank, and baby had such a tumble," hugging her favourite as she spoke. "Gavin is mending so nicely; aren't you, dear?"

"To be sure I am, Ladybird," returned Gavin cheerfully, "and it won't be a long job either. You just talk to the young lady, missie, and the time will pass quick enough;" and Bear at once set about her task of entertaining her visitor in the prettiest old-fashioned way.

"Vera was here yesterday," she began. "Mother and I called at the Red House and brought her back with us. Mother said Uncle Heber had given her a fit of the blues, and she wanted cheerful society. What is a fit of the blues, Miss Ray?" Bear's usual abbreviation of Ranee. "I asked Gavin, and he only laughed and would not tell me. But I should rather like a fit of the blues myself, it is such a pretty colour."

Gavin threw back his head and roared. "You will be the death of me if you go on like this, Ladybird. Blues and browns are much of a muchness when they come to fits. I don't hold with fits myself; they are mostly misfits to my thinking, and give a deal of trouble and worry." Then he gave Ranee a knowing glance, which said plainly, "Let's change the subject." "Did I ever tell you about that little lady, missie, who always put on her rose-coloured spectacles when she looked at anything? You see the fairies had given them to her when she was

in her cradle, and one smart little creature, with gauzy wings and her frock all covered with spangles, said to her, 'Now, little Carrie'—her name was Caroline, but they called her Carrie for short, for fairies don't use long words, it bothers them so—'when you grow older and begin to look about you, always wear your rose-coloured spectacles.'"

"Did she do what the fairy told her, Gavin?" asked Bernardine eagerly.

"Of course she did, missie. Carrie was a wise little girl, and she knew the fairies always gave the best advice. Sometimes, being young and skittish, she would forget to put them in her pocket, and then she would say, 'Oh, please will you wait a moment, for everything looks so dull and leaden, but when I put on my spectacles the world is ever so much prettier, and it is all as rosy as possible.'"

Bear heaved a tremendous sigh. "I wish there were fairies now, don't you, Miss Ray, for I would dearly love to have those rose-coloured spectacles. But Uncle Heber says the good little people, as he calls them, are all gone."

"Very likely there may be one or two left, Ladybird," returned Gavin, humouring the child in his good-natured way; "I must have a look some evening when the moon is up. But there, while I am telling stories, I am neglecting my work."

Ranee had been very much surprised to hear that Vera had been at Godstone the previous afternoon. She had certainly not seen Sir Heber, for he had been at the Garth until nearly seven. Bear was quite willing to give information on the subject.

"Vera had made excuses, but her mother would take no refusal; she really had the blues badly, you know"—

in a confidential whisper—"but she was all right when Vera promised to come. I think mother likes Vera almost as much as I do," went on Bear; "we both think her so pretty. I told mother last night, when Robarts was trying on her new dress, that it was no use covering herself with shiny spots"—Bear's definition of a sequin robe—"for she never could be as pretty as Vera. Mothers don't need to be pretty, do they, Miss Ray? But do you know mother seemed almost cross when I said that?"

"I don't wonder, Bear; it was not quite kind to say such a thing to poor mother." Ranee's voice was serious, in spite of a smothered guffaw from Gavin; but Bear looked at her in rather a bewildered way.

"She was only a little cross, you know—nothing really to mind. Besides, mother cant' be really poor or she would not have so many dresses. I expect Uncle Heber gives them to her; I know she takes him bills sometimes."

"Oh, who will o'er the hills with me?" chanted Gavin in rather a hoarse bass. "There, Ladybird, I have finished the job, and now we will go back to the Squire and the Crow's Nest." Gavin always called his master the Squire, though the title belonged properly to Roger Ashton. Sir Heber was lord of the manor. "Perhaps this young lady will come too?" But Bear held up a tiny finger.

"Hush, Gavin, how can you be so naughty, when you know Uncle Heber is hiding in the Crow's Nest, and that no one is to know it?"

Bear's voice was so full of hurt indignation at this base betrayal of the secret that Gavin looked excessively penitent.

"Well now, missie, if that was not downright car lessness on my part. Now, if the fairies had given n that nice little thinking-box that they gave to the goc boy who learnt his lessons so well and became Arc bishop of Canterbury, I shouldn't have made such a mi take. I will tell you that story some day. But there the mistress beckoning to us, and you are ready for yo tea, aren't you, my Ladybird?" and Gavin lifted her gently and carried her in, her useful allies Mr. Right a Mr. Left tucked under his arm.

Mrs. Lugard watched them with a gentle air of amus ment. Then, as Gavin deposited the child in a ch beside the tea-table, she said:

"Will you find Sir Heber, Gavin, and tell him that have two visitors, and that I shall expect him to cor and entertain the ladies?"

Gavin looked embarrassed. "Can you tell me whe I am to find him, ma'am?" he returned, after a momen puzzled silence. "The Squire is here, there, and ever where."

"Oh, he is somewhere in the garden," replied M Lugard carelessly. "You might look in the Crow's Ne first." Then Bear gave a little scream of dismay.

"Oh, mother, how could you guess! and Uncle Heb said it would be such a nice hiding-place." Then s clapped her hands over her mouth. "Oh, I ought n to have said that, ought I, Gavin dear."

"Well missie," with reluctant candour, "you have p your little foot in it, and made a mess of things, I a afraid."

"Yes, Gavin'," shaking her head, "I am afraid I ha been dreadfully messy;" and then they all laughed.

"I don't think you could keep a secret if you trie

Bear," observed her mother good-humouredly. "I had no idea your uncle was in the Crow's Nest, I only spoke at random. Well, we won't wait for the truant. Will you take that chair by the window, Ranee? What were we talking about, Alix? Oh, I remember—my two garden-parties. Remember I shall expect you and Ranee to come to both. You will get rid of your crutches by then."

"I am not so sure of that, Dawtie."

"Well, no matter," with a pretty little air of peremptoriness; "you can come early and have a nice seat near the pavilion, so that you can hear the band, and you need not walk about at all. Ranee, I meant to tell you that Vera is coming to-morrow to spend the day, and I have just sent a note to tell her that she must sleep here. I want her help with the invitations and arrangements. I daresay I shall keep her a second night."

Ranee opened her eyes rather widely at this. Mrs. Lugard's monopoly of Vera seemed a trifle cool. She wondered how Vera liked the invitation. And then her thoughts flew off at a tangent to the garden-parties. She had not quite finished the lace that was to trim the Indian muslin gown. It would take her a few days to complete the length required, and she would have to work hard. She could not give up her early morning rambles, but she had long mornings and afternoons. There was no need to spend hours swinging in her hammock, reading delightful books. She was getting far too idle and luxurious. There were only three weeks to the first garden-party, and she was determined that Vera should look her best. The 5th of July, her birthday too, she thought. Ranee's busy little brain was so preoccupied that she lost

the thread of the conversation, until a question from Mrs. Lugard to Alix roused her.

"Have you heard anything of Nicholas lately, Alix dear?"

"I! What do you mean?" faltered Alix, with a painful blush. "What odd things you say, Dawtie." Then Mrs. Lugard's bright eyes danced with mischievous mirth.

"I thought I should startle you. But, after all, the question is not so dreadful. You must know, Ranee, that my stepson Nicholas and Alix are very good friends. You would not think that such a demure little person can flirt, but I assure you——"

"How do people flirt, mother?" asked Bear anxiously. "Is it something naughty or nice, for Alix looks so hot?"

"Dawtie, how can you say such things before the child! It is so ridiculous; and you know how I dislike this sort of teasing. You hear so constantly from Captain Lugard that you cannot require any information;" and Alix spoke with vexed dignity. But Mrs. Lugard only laughed.

"You are mistaken, my dear. The bad boy has not written to his mamma for an age. Well, Heber," as her brother stepped in at the window, "so you were in the Crow's Nest after all. Am I not clever, dear, in finding out your hiding-places?" But Sir Heber made no reply to this. He shook hands gravely with the visitors and sat down beside his little niece. The child was regarding him anxiously."

"I did not mean to tell," she said coaxingly, "only mother guessed, and then it popped out. Why are words like corks, Uncle Heber?"

"Is it a riddle? I give it up, Bear."

"I don't think my mouth shuts as tightly as some people's," continued the child seriously. "The words seem to run out so fast, like the little chickens in the hen-coop, and there is no getting them back. Uncle Heber, I want to ask you another question. Do you ever flirt like Alix?"

Sir Heber was too much astonished to answer. Mrs. Lugard clapped her hands delightedly. Bear often made droll speeches, but now she was surpassing herself.

"I am afraid it is something very shocking," went on the embarrassing Bear, "for Alix got so red and looked quite angry when mother said it; and you are rather red too, Uncle Heber."

"It is a pity you are not more careful in your remarks before the child, Damaris," observed Sir Heber in rather a disgusted tone. "Bear, don't you trouble your little head about things you don't understand. Sometimes grown-up people play rather unwise games. They think they are only in fun, but they are not always kind."

"I am sure my dear Alix is never unkind, Uncle Heber. She almost cried when that horrid little Tommy Burton told her that he liked pulling the wings off the poor flies."

"Human flies have their wings torn off too, sometimes," muttered Sir Heber. "Have this little frosted cake, Bear; it will give you something to do." But Bear had finished her tea, and was rather in a restless mood. She wanted to show Ranee her garden—her own special garden, which Gavin always kept so beautifully. Bear, who was an impetuous little soul, was apt to be fussy at times, and in her hurry to adjust Mr. Right, Mr. Left slipped from her weak, uncertain hold, and got

entangled in her mother's muslin dress, tearing an awkward rent in the delicate fabric.

"Bear, how can you be so careless!" exclaimed Mrs. Lugard angrily, and she gave the child a slight push. In the moment's vexation she forgot the little creature's helplessness, and before Sir Heber could reach her, Bear had fallen over the footstool and lay, a forlorn little heap, at her mother's feet. Sir Heber muttered something under his breath as he lifted Bear up and carried her to the couch.

"Hush, my pet—hush," he said, trying to soothe her, for Bear was crying piteously. "You are not really hurt, you know, it was only an accident." But Bear wailed afresh.

"Mother pushed me hard, and I have hurt my side dreadfully, Uncle Heber," she sobbed. "Yes, you did, mother"—as Mrs. Lugard, with rather a frightened air, came towards the couch—"and it was not my fault that Mr. Left tore such a big hole; and you pushed me, and now my side will ache all night." And Bear, who had a temper of her own, hid her face on her uncle' shoulder and refused to look at her mother and make friends.

"Bear, how can you be so naughty and disagreeable!" exclaimed Mrs. Lugard in an injured voice. "You have spoiled my pretty dress and you are not a bit sorry, and I scarcely touched you"—for Damaris secretly repented her impatience. "Now, don't go on crying or I must send for nurse, for you are not hurt. Indeed she is not Heber, she is only in a temper, and you are just making her worse as usual by giving in to her." But Sir Heber made no answer to this. He was quite aware that the fall had not really harmed Bear, but the child's nerves were jarred by the shock; she was very excitable and

highly strung, and Damaris's lack of gentleness had wounded her sensitive nature. Bear's passionate crying was due rather to hurt feelings than to any physical pain; but Damaris was too dense to perceive this.

"I shall ring for nurse," she said, rather crossly; "I cannot have my visitors so disturbed. Bear is really too old to be such a cry-baby." But Sir Heber only stroked the dishevelled brown locks.

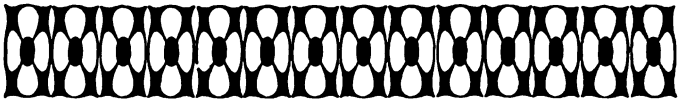
"Shall I carry you up to the nursery, Bear?" he whispered in her ear, "and I will read you some more of that fairy story." And as Bear nodded acquiescence, he took her in his arms; but his sister's voice arrested him.

"You must not keep your uncle long, Bear," she said, "for he is going with me to the Mainwarings." Then turning to Alix, she continued, "We have promised to dine *en famille* with them this evening; Charlie Mainwaring is up from Aldershot, and the old people want to see him."

"But surely you will not go now, Damaris?" observed her brother, meaningly. But Mrs. Lugard flushed as though she were angry.

"Why, what nonsense, Heber! Do you suppose because Bear chooses to get into a temper that I shall give up a pleasant evening? It is perfectly ridiculous and wicked the way you spoil that child! I shall expect you not to keep me waiting;" and there was a touch of haughtiness in Damaris's tone.

"I should advise you not to wait for me," returned Sir Heber shortly. "Under the circumstances we cannot both leave, so please make my excuses to Mrs. Mainwaring. Johnston will take you all right;" and before Damaris could answer he had left the room.



Chapter XVIII

"IT IS HER WANT OF MOTHERLINESS"

Great wisdom is required in those who would point out faults to others. They need deep love in their hearts, that they may truly seek the good of those in whom they detect flaws or errors. —Rev. J. R. Miller.

This little episode had disturbed the tranquillity of the atmosphere, and Alix and Ranee were relieved when the carriage was announced. Mrs. Lugard did not press them to remain. The jagged rent in the pretty gown, and Sir Heber's determination to remain at home, had seriously ruffled her equanimity.

"Heber is too absurd," she said pettishly; "but there is no use saying anything when he is in one of his obstinate moods. He gives in to Bear's whims until the child is quite spoilt. You must have seen yourself, Alix, that it was just temper, and that she really was not hurt? A tiny push like that! The fact was, she stumbled over my footstool; but Bear is so awkward."

"I think the fall jarred her nerves," returned Alix quietly; "so little hurts her, you see. I am very sorry that your lovely frock is torn, but it can easily be mended." But Mrs. Lugard shrugged her shoulders. Dress was her secret passion, and, as Alix knew, she spent a great deal of time and thought in planning and arranging those charming toilettes. Her vanity was frank and undisguised; to be well groomed and perfectly

dressed constituted Damaris's idea of the chief duty of woman.

Both the girls were a little silent as they drove down the avenue. Ranee was feeling the pang of a sudden disillusion. Mrs. Lugard was a well-bred, charming little person, but she was by no means perfect. Her good looks, too, depended a great deal on her expression; this afternoon she had been almost plain.

Alix, who was very quick, seemed to read her thoughts.

"I wish this had not happened, Ranee; you have not seen Dawtie at her best this afternoon. But we must make allowances for her; it was really very trying to have her frock so injured the first time she put it on. Still, she ought to have remembered how helpless Bear is. But it was not much of a push really."

But it was not easy to convince Ranee of this. Young people are often severe judges; it needs knowledge of the world and ripened experience to form a charitable estimate of one's fellow-creatures. If all is not gold that glitters, neither is all dross that is dull and mixed with alloy; and yet until the end of time will poor purblind man seek to pull out the mote from his neighbour's eye, forgetting the beam that hinders his own inward vision.

So Ranee was inclined to be hard on Damaris, and was not in the least disposed to make allowances.

"It was her want of motherliness," she returned. "Of course it was a pity having that nasty rent, and in the front breadth too—one never likes to have one's clothes spoilt; but to be impatient with a poor little cripple—that is what I cannot understand."

"Neither can I," murmured Alix under her breath. Then aloud, "Dawtie is really very fond of Bear, and the child is devoted to her."

"Then why does she not stay with her this evening?" retorted Ranee. "She must be selfish, Alix. I am quite sure from Sir Heber's manner that he fully expected her to remain;" and Alix could not deny this.

"I am afraid Dawtie is rather too fond of pleasure," she observed reluctantly, but she prudently forbore to say more. What would Ranee have thought of the child's loneliness in Paris, when, day after day, Damaris and her stepson went on their giddy round of pleasure—sight-seeing, shopping, gay luncheons and dinners at restaurants, and evenings at the theatre? And there was no Uncle Heber there to be Bear's patient playmate. He was enjoying the solitude of Godstone Park.

Alix was not one to stir up strife and faction, for she was a gentle little soul and loyal to her friends, and in spite of her faults Damaris had shown her a good deal of kindness. Damaris was always good-natured, as long as she had not to sacrifice her inclinations.

For the next few days Ranee worked incessantly at her lace. She made Alix read to her, and each day they chose a different nook in the orchard. And soon the task was accomplished; and when Vera came over to the Garth to tell Ranee about her visit to Godstone, Ranee threw the parcel into her lap.

"Oh, Ray, do you really mean that you have finished it?" and Vera's eyes sparkled with pleasure as she thanked her. "Isnt' it dear of her to make all this lovely lace for me, Alix? The garden-party at Godstone will be such a big affair that one will want a nice frock. What will you wear, Ranee? I am afraid your blouse is no longer fresh." Which was certainly the fact, as Ranee's wardrobe was extremely limited, and the blouse had been worn frequently in the evening.

'Shall we tell her, Ranee?" and Alix looked rather sterious; "I wanted it to be a surprise." Then as ee nodded assent, "We are both going to wear white lin and Gainsborough hats. Ranee is being a good and giving me great pleasure."

I never meant to tell you, Vera," burst out Ranee, t Alix is such a darling, when she ordered her own s she insisted I should have one exactly like it. And hats are coming from London; they will be just ly. Of course she ought not to do it; but I had to in." Ranee had made a fight for it, until she saw Alix was really hurt by her refusal.

Girls ought not to be too proud to accept things from other," she had said in quite a wounded tone. "Put self in my place, Ranee—look what you have all for me; and yet you hesitate to accept a few trump- yards of white muslin."

Trumpery! Think of all the lace and embroidery, then the beautiful picture hat!" But Ranee had led to persuasion at last, and Alix had been absurdly eful.

Well, she was right; I should have done the same er place," observed Ranee, when Alix had left them ave a sisterly chat. "I never saw Alix so pleased it anything as when I gave way. I shall not look ell as you, Vera, for somehow you always seem as gh you were poured into your clothes, they fit so ectly—it was Margaret who said that—but all the e you won't be ashamed of your sister."

I should think not!" with affectionate indignation. am so glad you and Alix have told me about this, now I can set Peter's mind at rest. He declared you must be properly dressed, if he had to get you

a new frock. He was only saying so last night. But now it will not be necessary. And really Sallie's blue muslin is quite nice, and she only needs fresh trimming for her hat."

"I wish you could have a new hat, Vera. You see you are always driving with Mrs. Lugard, and your best hat won't be fit to be seen soon." Then Vera coloured a little, as though she were embarrassed.

"I don't know what you will say, Ray, but I am going to wear one of Damaris's Paris hats. It is quite new, she has only worn it twice, and it does not suit her. And I look so well in it that Damaris was delighted, and insisted that I must have it. It was so kind and good-natured of her. Oh, you should see her things, Ranee; she has such dresses, and all in such good taste."

"Do you call her Damaris?" asked Ranee, a little coldly.

"Yes; she begged me to do so. She hates that stiff Mrs. Lugard. And then Damaris is such a lovely name that it is quite a pleasure to use it. I did so enjoy my visit, Ray. I stayed three whole days, for I only came home on Tuesday. We worked hard most of the time, writing out invitations and making arrangements. Now and then Damaris sent for Sir Heber to help us; but I am afraid the whole thing bores him. It is not the expense he minds, but he told me privately that he does hate these big functions. He is such a shy man, you see."

"Why can't he put his foot down, and be master in his own house?" returned Ranee with such vehemence that Vera looked slightly surprised.

"Oh, he is far too kind and unselfish to do that. You have no idea how good he is to Damaris. He gives her everything. I believe she has no money of her own at

all, and yet she dresses like a little duchess. You should see her evening dresses, Ray."

"Well, I daresay Sir Heber is very rich; and as he is not married he can afford to provide for her and Bear. Did you see much of the child, Vera?"

"Not as much as I should have wished. We were so busy, and somehow Damaris absorbed all my attention. Bear used to come to me when I was dressing for dinner; and once when some visitors called I went up to the nursery, as they still call it, and found Sir Heber there playing Halma with her. Bear would not let me go, but I felt terribly in the way."

"I think Mrs. Lugard ought to be more with Bear," observed Ranee; but Vera defended her friend warmly.

"It is not Damaris's fault, Ray; but she is an extremely busy little person, and so much of her time is spent in returning calls. Some of her friends live six or seven miles away. She would often take Bear with her, only the long drives tire her so; and, as Damaris says, you never can be sure of what the child will say next. She makes the oddest speeches to people.

"Last week they were at the Mainwarings, and Colonel Mainwaring's old aunt, Lady Martin, was there. She is rather like a witch, Damaris said, very ugly, and very rich, and quite a harmless old thing, and she took a great deal of notice of the child; but Bear stared her almost out of countenance. The poor old lady got quite red.

"'I suppose you are thinking how ugly I am, my dear,' she said half-jokingly; but Bear answered quite seriously:

"'Yes, but it does not matter, as mother says, because you are so very old, you see, and then you have such a lot of money. You will be all right in heaven, Lady

Martin, because the angels make ugly people beautiful.' Bear thought she was saying something quite nice and comforting, but Damaris declared that she could have sunk into the ground."

And Ranee was so amused by this little anecdote that she made Vera repeat it again for Alix's benefit; but it was evident to both of them that Vera was still infatuated with her new friend.

Alix did not seem much impressed when she heard of Damaris's generosity. "Dawtie always gives away a thing that does not suit her," she remarked. "She wanted to give me a very pretty dress once, because she said the colour made her look sallow; but I refused to take it. I never asked her what became of it; but I knew father would not care for me to have it, and I have as many frocks as I want;" and then the subject dropped.

Ranee had not seen much of Peter lately. He had one or two new patients, and Dr. Weston often made use of him. So one afternoon Alix drove her over to the Red House to spend a few hours with her family, and Peter walked back with her in the evening. He had been so pleased to see her that Ranee guessed at once that she had been greatly missed; but he looked well and seemed in excellent spirits, and talked more openly than usual about his prospects.

"The Holt fortunes are mending," he said, as they lingered for a moment to admire the gorgeous sunset. "Dr. Weston gives me plenty to do, and my last new patient is promising. I am so glad you are having such a good old time, Ra, and I must beg you not to hurry home on my account. Mr. Ashton is most anxious for you to prolong your stay. He says Miss Ashton is all the better for your cheerful society."

"Are you sure you don't want me, Peter?" with a wistful glance at him. Ranee was very happy at the Garth, but if Peter missed her all the friends in the world would not have kept her. But Peter hardened his heart. "If the little 'un guessed how much he missed her," he said to himself, "she would be flying home like a miniature whirlwind."

"Oh, indeed, little Vanity," he observed, tilting his chin in the air contemptuously, "so you think we can't exist without you."

"Oh, no, Peter, I am not quite so conceited as that; but sometimes I do want to get at you so dreadfully." There was a little break in Ranee's voice, and Peter became serious at once.

"Look here, Ra," he said, "we are pals, you know, and you have got lots of sense in that little brown head of yours. I don't say that I shan't be glad to have you home again; but I would not have you hurry away from the Garth for the worlds—as long as they want to keep you. I am only too pleased that you should have such good friends. Now there is Vera, Mrs. Lugard has taken her up, and gives her no end of pleasure."

"Peter, just let me say one word. Of course, I want Vera to have a good time, but are you sure that Mrs. Lugard will be a good influence for her? She is rather a worldly-minded little body." This was Machiavelian policy on Ranee's part. She had no longer any wish that Peter should fall in love with "the woman named Damaris."

"She is up to date of course," returned Peter calmly, "and not exactly the widow indeed that St. Paul mentions, but she is awfully decent, you know, and she will put Vera up to a thing or two. With all her jolliness,

Vera is not quite modern enough. Mrs. Lugard will polish her up a bit."

This was a new idea to Ranee. Did Peter think them a trifle old-fashioned? But evidently he had finished his remarks on Vera, and had changed the subject with his usual abruptness.

"I have seen a good deal of your friend Miss Burke," he observed as they walked on. "I often come across her at the alms-houses, or in Bennoch Lane. She is doing a good work there."

"Oh, you mean that girl with spinal complaint?"

"Yes, Rebecca Colwyn. If you could only see the change in the poor child since Miss Burke took her in hand. Why, I hardly knew the place when I saw it yesterday. It is a horrid little dull back room, looking out on a yard with clothes-lines and flapping garments of all sorts and sizes."

"Oh yes, I know, Margaret told me about it. And Mrs. Colwyn goes out charing."

"Well, the place was like a bower yesterday," went on Peter. "Clean muslin curtains and a new quilt, and a smart red tablecloth, a blossoming plant or two, and a basket of roses, and there was actually a canary—such a pert little fellow in a green cage in the window."

"It is just like Hannah!" exclaimed Ranee enthusiastically. "She never does things by halves. Her motto is 'Thorough.'"

"Well, so it is, Ra; you have hit the right nail on the head. Well, the Colwyns don't know how to express their gratitude. Rebecca just worships her. She goes in every morning and puts her comfortable for the day; and she actually pays a woman to go in once a week to clean up the place, so that Mrs. Colwyn may not have to work

hard; and she takes Rebecca nice things to eat. Oh e is a good sort," and Peter evidently meant what he d.

"I hear Sallie goes to sit with Rebecca sometimes."

"Yes, Miss Burke asked her to do so. Vera is too uch taken up with her new friend at Godstone. Perhaps Miss Burke has told you all this?"

"No, she has not been over at the Garth for a fortnight. She sent me a note to tell me that she was far too busy; but she was very well and cheerful when I last saw her."

"She is a different creature," was Peter's reply, and then they reached the Garth. Dinner was just over, but Alix insisted that Peter should join them at dessert, and enjoy the freshly-gathered strawberries. Ranee and he had already partaken of a high tea at the Red House, but the delicious fruit and a glass or two of excellent claret were not unwelcome to the young doctor. Afterwards they strolled about the garden and orchard, Alix leaning on her father's arm and only supported by one crutch. She was getting on famously, Peter told her; and though she would probably be rather lame for some time longer, he thought she would be able to discard her crutches at the garden-party if she had a stick and the support of a strong arm.

"You are looking pounds better, Miss Ashton," he said encouragingly.

"Yes indeed," she returned quite brightly, "thanks to you and Dr. Weston."

"We must not forget their colleague, Alix," observed Mr. Ashton. "I think there is some one else to whom thanks are due"; and then he looked at Ranee with a smile that lighted up his rugged face very pleasantly, and

Ranee felt a quick warm sensation of pleasure, for day she spent under his roof her respect and likir creased for the master of the Garth.

Strangely enough, Peter endorsed this sentime later on she walked to the gate with him. "Mr. A is a good fellow, Ra," he observed, as he lighted his "He is what you call a straight man, but he is no to know at first sight. There is a sort of barbed fencing round him that rather trips you up."

"Oh, Peter, what a funny idea!"

"Not a bit. Most reserved people are like that. have got 'No thoroughfare' and 'Trespassers w prosecuted' written legibly all over them."

"Steel traps and 'Beware the dog,' I suppos mean."

"Just so," returned Peter blandly. "But let n you for your comfort, little 'un, I think you have ma to creep under the barbed wire fence." And after ing this oracular speech Peter grinned and waved as he struck down the grass-bordered road. And ran back to the house.

Chapter XIX

"A GENTLEMANLY TRAMP"

"We cannot conceal shoddy in the great web of life," says Emerson. "Every wicked, rotten, sleazy thread will stretch itself across the fabric and testify against us for ever."

You seem to suffer under some strong affliction.—*Black Dwarf.*

About a week before the garden-party at Godstone Park, Mrs. Lugard drove over to the Garth. This time she had brought Bernardine with her.

Although it was only the end of June, the weather was extremely hot and sultry, and more resembled an August day, and Alix and Ranee had betaken themselves to the anteroom leading into the drawing-room. The glass door opening into the garden, and the Indian matting and cushioned basket-work chairs, gave it a cool aspect, and Alix had always called it the summer parlour.

Damaris, who was a perfect salamander, seemed quite impervious to the heat and in excellent spirits.

"Well, girls," she said, with the gay little air that people thought so attractive, "no wonder you are surprised to see me, for there is no shade, and the dust is indescribable. I told Bear she had much better remain at home, but she never will be left behind when she knows I am coming to the Garth."

"Bear knows how much we love to have her," returned Alix, as Ranee drew up chairs for their guests and took off Bear's shady hat.

"She is a tiresome little monkey, Ranee," observed Damaris in a good-natured tone. "The Mainwarings have a children's garden-party this afternoon—quite an informal affair—and they wanted Bear to go, but she just cried at the idea, and Heber said he would not have her teased."

Bear's sweet little face clouded a moment at her mother's words.

"Mother said I was naughty, Miss Ray," she observed plaintively; "but I do hate children's parties; it just makes me tired and sore all over to see all the boys and girls playing and not be able to join. Mother does not understand, because she is so well and strong herself." But Damaris only laughed in an amused way at this childish outburst.

"I should have insisted on her going, only Heber was so vexatious about it," she returned composedly, "and it was really too hot to argue; so here we are. And now I have got some news to tell you."

"But do let me talk first, mother," implored Bear with the persistence of a spoilt child. "I want to tell Miss Ray and Alix my dream, because it was so pretty." Then Damaris shrugged her shoulders in a resigned way which said plainly that mothers had much to bear.

"It was such a dear, lovely dream," went on the child eagerly, "and it made me so happy, and Uncle Heber liked it so. I thought I was in heaven, Miss Ray, and they had a children's party there, and all the little boy and girl angels were playing at ball. Such beautiful balls they looked, as though they were made out of the rainbow. And there were little baby angels playing with the big ones, and I did so love to watch them, though I wanted to play too. And then such a pretty boy angel

came up to me. He had golden curls, and a great white dove's wings on his shoulders. 'Why don't you join in the game, little Bernardine?' he asked, and all the others stopped playing and crowded around us to listen. 'I should love to play,' I said, half-crying, 'but my back always hurts so, and I cannot play on crutches.' And then they all burst out laughing, as if I had said something very funny. 'People always throw away their crutches before they come to the House Beautiful,' the boy angel said, when they had finished laughing. "Your crutches are gone, little Bernardine, for here there is no more trouble or pain.' And then all the others joined in like a chorus, 'No more trouble or pain, little Bernardine;' and then I woke. Wasn't it a lovely dream, Miss Ray?"

"Indeed it was, darling," returned Ranee, kissing her, and Alix's eyes were full of tears; but Damaris seemed quite unimpressed.

"I never knew such a child for dreams and fancies," she observed. "I tell her sometimes that her imagination runs away with her, and that she makes them up."

"Oh no, mother!" in an indignant voice; but Damaris held up a warning finger.

"Now Bear, be quiet; you have monopolised the conversation quite enough, and it is time I had my innings. Just hold your tongue for a minute, please, till I have presented my budget. Alix, guess what I have come over to tell you." Damaris's manner was so mysterious that Alix changed colour.

"I never guess things, as you know, Dawtie," she said faintly; "I am too—too stupid, I suppose."

"Tell that to the marines, my dear," returned Damaris with a crisp laugh. "Of course you know my news

concerns Nicholas, only you won't own to it. I had a letter from the dear fellow yesterday, and he is coming home."

"Home! To Godstone, do you mean?" Alix had grown suddenly very white.

"Yes, *cherie*. Is it not charming news? I have been in such spirits ever since I had Nick's letter. I just wrote back to him at once to tell him that he must come in time for the first garden-party or I would never forgive him. 'Expect me any time between the 30th of June and the 8th of July,' that was what he wrote, but it would be too provoking if he arrived a day too late."

"And to-day is the 28th"—Alix seemed hardly able to bring out the words.

"Dear Alix," exclaimed Ranee anxiously, "I am sure you are not well!" And indeed the girl looked ghastly. "The hot weather has made you feel faint." Some feminine instinct made Ranee say this—a sudden longing to protect Alix from Mrs. Lugard's teasing comments. "You had better lie down in your room, dear, and I will send you up some tea. You will excuse her, will you not, Mrs. Lugard?" she continued, as she passed her arm around Alix and helped her to rise. "Alix is not strong yet, and the heat tries her."

"She seemed perfectly well a few minutes ago," returned Damaris, with a trace of irritation in her tone at this tiresome interruption. "If I fan her for a few minutes she will be better." But Ranee quietly carried her point. Alix gave her arm a grateful squeeze.

Happily at that moment Walton came to ask where his mistress would take tea, and Ranee begged him to assist her to her room. She did not leave her until she had settled her on her couch by the open window, with a

smelling-bottle and eau-de-Cologne beside her. She would have fanned her, but Alix waved her away.

"No, don't trouble; I shall be all right soon. Please —please go down to Dawtie and keep her away. I cannot talk; tell her so, Ranee dear. My head is bad, and Dawtie tires me so."

"All right, I'll look after her and Bear," replied Ranee, feigning a cheerfulnes she did not feel, for Alix looked extremely ill. The change in her was so sudden and inexplicable that Ranee might well feel perplexed. "Is it because Mrs. Lugard's stepson is coming home?" she asked herself as she went slowly downstairs. "There is some mystery here. What is Nicholas Lugard to Alix that she cannot hear his name without changing colour and appearing agitated? Has her depression something to do with him?" Ranee felt she had grave cause for uneasiness, but she put a force on herself and tried to look as usual as she entered the room.

She found Damaris talking to Mr. Ashton; she had evidently given him her own version of Alix's indisposition, for he did not seem the least anxious.

"Mrs. Lugard tells me that Alix is a little faint with the heat," he said to Ranee. "This is rather strange, for the room seems to me delightfully cool after my workshop."

"So it seems to me," returned Ranee truthfully. "But Alix is not quite strong yet. I persuaded her to lie down. Mrs. Binney will look after her."

"I suppose I may go up to her presently and bid her good-bye?" asked Damaris. She spoke rather curtly, and Ranee hesitated a moment. Mrs. Lugard was inclined to be touchy, and she did not wish to offend her, but she could not have Alix disturbed. To her relief

Mr. Ashton came to her help; he had interpreted her wistful glance at him aright.

"I think it will be better to leave Alix quite quiet, Mrs. Lugard," he said in a decided manner. "Talking will only make her head worse. Now let Miss Holt give you some tea, and after that I want to show you a little bit of carving I have just finished. You are a good judge, I know;" and at this delicate little compliment Damaris looked more amiable, though she still harped on her grievance.

"It is so vexatious," she said, as she sipped her tea, "after coming through all this heat and dust to share my good news with Alix. I am so excited, Mr. Ashton, because Nicholas is coming to stay with us. And I have not seen him for an age, dear fellow."

Mr. Ashton listened with polite attention, but Ranee saw at once that the information did not please him.

"That will be very pleasant for you, and him too," he returned rather stiffly; and his manner told the girl that Captain Lugard was evidently not a favourite with him. "May I ask how long he proposes to stay?"

Then Damaris shrugged her shapely shoulders. She had little girlish mannerisms that most people thought charming. Mr. Ashton had once said in Ranee's hearing that he thought married women, and especially widows, should be dignified. "Your friend Mrs. Lugard is a lively little person, but in my opinion she poses too much;" and Alix had thought this rather severe.

So Damaris executed her favourite little shrug. "My dear Mr. Ashton, I wish I could tell you, but Nicholas is the most erratic person in the world. You can never count on his movements. He may stay for weeks, or he may be off in forty-eight hours, just as the whim seizes

ıim. He is a gentlemanly tramp, I tell him." But here Bear lifted up her voice—it was decidedly fractious.

"Mother is pleased about Nicholas, but I don't think want him to come, and I am quite sure Uncle Heber oes not."

"What on earth are you saying now, Bear?" asked Damaris sharply. But Bernardine was too busy with her wn grievance to notice her mother's annoyance.

"Nicholas is never nice to me," she continued, "and hat is why I don't love him. He calls me the little itcher with long ears. But I have not long ears, have I, Mr. Ashton?"

"I think they are very pretty ones," he returned pinching one gently. "It was only a joke on Captain Lugard's part, my dear child."

"But I don't like jokes that are not kind," she complained. "Uncle Heber and Gavin only call me pretty names, not nasty ones like Nicholas's—queer little Stick, and Miss Hoppity, and Mother Bunch, and heaps of other names—Silly Billy, and the bear with the sore head. I do hate them so."

"It is so ridiculous of you to make such a fuss, Bear," bserved her mother, "for it only makes Nick worse. f you took his teasing more quietly he would soon leave ff. Young men will have their little jokes."

"But Uncle Heber says it is not right of Nicholas," eturned Bear. "He says he is far too rough with me, nd that is why he does not want him to come."

"I think we may as well see the carving now," exlaimed Damaris impatiently, "as this conversation is ot particularly edifying. I shall leave you at home next ime I come to Garth, Bear." And with these words Damaris took up her fan and sunshade and swept out

of the room. Mr. Ashton followed her, but Ranee detained the child.

"Stay with me, darling," she said gently. "The workshop is far too hot for you. You can tell me some more of your pretty dreams."

"I don't feel like remembering them any more," returned the child sadly. "Mother is cross with me because I said that about Nicholas; but I do hate him to come, and I know Uncle Heber feels the same.

"My dear Bear, it is impossible that you can know anything of the kind!"

"Oh no, Miss Ray; I am quite sure that Uncle Heber was sorry when mother showed him the letter; he frowned so when he read it. Mother went out of the room before he finished it, and I said to him, 'I wish Nicholas was not coming, for we are so much more comfortable by ourselves.' And Uncle Heber looked so grave. 'You are right, my little Bear,' he said, in quite a melancholy voice. "Miss Ray," dropping her voice mysteriously, "I think Nicholas worries Uncle Heber sometimes. He is always wanting money; and then mother cries and takes his part, and there is such a fuss. But I know Uncle Heber is good to him." But what other embarrassing revelations Bear would have made was checked by her mother's peremptory voice. She had just missed the child, and insisted on her accompanying them to the workshop.

"She's afraid of what Bear may say to me," thought Ranee as she took up her work, and her heart was full of pity for the little creature, for it was evident to her that her mother was most injudicious in her management of the child. In some ways Bear was over-indulged, but Damaris's affection was capricious, the gentle firmness

and restraint that Bear needed were altogether lacking. Damaris either laughed at her little tempers or left her alone, and she was too dense and healthy an animal to comprehend Bear's nervous and excitable temperament: she called her naughty when she really wanted soothing.

Damaris, who had scant sympathy with physical troubles, thought herself ill-used because her only child was a sickly cripple—her motherhood was limited and undeveloped.

"I think it is very hard that my only child should be so different from other people's children," she said once to Alix.

When the visitors had driven away, Ranee went up to Alix, but she found very little improvement in her appearance; her face was a greyish tinge, and there were dark shadows under her eyes.

"Dear Alix, you look quite ill. I am afraid you will not be fit to come downstairs again this evening."

"I am afraid so, too. Will you tell father I am very sorry, but my head is so bad?"

"Shall I bathe it with eau-de-Cologne and water?" But Alix shook her head.

"No, it would be no use, and I would rather be alone. You are very kind, Ranee, but even your voice is too much just now. I will lie quietly here, and later on Binney will help me to bed. Don't let father come up to me."

And thus dismissed Ranee reluctantly withdrew to dress for dinner. Alix was certainly unfit to talk, it was no use asking her questions. "She is in great trouble," she said to herself. "Her eyes have a strange, hunted look in them; but I can do nothing for her now."

Mr. Ashton took Alix's message very quietly. He

evidently attributed her headache to the sudden sultr
ness of the weather. He was in an unusually cheerf
mood, and rallied the girl on her gravity. Then l
seemed bent on amusing her, and told her some mo
stories; and as he was in the middle of one when t
coffee arrived, he proposed that they should sit out on t
terrace and enjoy the coolness. And a very pleasa
hour followed. They had been silent a minute, listeni
to the hooting of a distant owl, when Ranee said st
denly—

"Is Captain Lugard a nice man, Mr. Ashton? B
does not seem very fond of him."

"No, I daresay not," was the reply; "he is not
sort of man to understand a sensitive child like B
nardine. But I believe he is good-natured and tolera
kind-hearted. What was that Mrs. Lugard called hi
'A gentlemanly tramp,' was it not? Well, that is
excellent description of Nicholas Lugard."

"But he is very good-looking, is he not?"

"Yes; but a tramp may have good looks. In so
people's opinion he is a perfect Apollo, and I can
deny that he is a handsome fellow. But personally I
no approve of him."

"I suppose I must not ask why?"

"I have no objection to answering the questio
returned Mr. Ashton quietly, though he was somew
surprised at her curiosity on the subject. "I believe
is a good soldier and takes a pride in his professio
and this may be his salvation. But Sir Heber once t
me he was rather unsatisfactory, and far too fond of t
ting—though I believe he has turned over a new l
lately. I am afraid he has given Maxwell a lot of trou
one way or another. I know he has had to put his f

down once or twice pretty heavily. No, I don't approve of him," lighting a fresh cigarette, "gentlemanly tramps are not to my taste. I had to tell Mrs. Lugard plainly that I would not have him flirting with my little girl; and when I found out that he was in Paris I sent for Alix to come home—only she took a fresh cold and could not travel for some time. But Mrs. Lugard promised she would keep him in order. I hope"—and here was a trace of anxiety in his tone—"that she kept her faith with me. But Alix is young and impressionable, and somehow I fancy——" He checked himself abruptly. But Ranee was too much interested to weigh her words.

"But you don't think she really cares for him?"

"Cares for him! Do you mean that Alix, my little girl, is really in love with Nicholas Lugard? God forbid, Miss Holt. She is all I have belonging to me"—speaking with sudden passion—"but knowing her nature as I do, I would rather stand beside her coffin than see her the wife of a man like Nicholas Lugard." And so saying Mr. Ashton rose and put a stop to the conversation by saying it was late and that he must make his evening round.



Chapter XX

"I SHALL TELL HIM TO-DAY"

He who despairs wants love, wants faith, for faith, hope, an love are three torches which blend their light together, nor doe the one shine without the other.—METASTASIO.

WHEN Ranee went up stairs she found Alix was al ready in bed. Her head was better she informed he and she hoped to be able to sleep; and at this hint Rane reluctantly left her. Alix seemed determined to give he no opening for conversation that night; she evidentl dreaded to be questioned on the subject of her sudde indisposition. But Ranee, who was a tenacious litt person, had quite made up her mind to have it out wi her on the first favourable opportunity.

"I shall ask her plainly what is troubling her" s said to herself, "and if Captain Lugard is anything her. I am very sharp—Peter always said I would ha made an excellent detective—and she will not find easy to escape me." And then she ensconced herself the window-seat in the Dame's Room to enjoy the co ness of the summer night and think over the occu rences of the afternoon and evening. Her thoughts we so busy that the time passed rapidly. Half an ho before the sound of firm footsteps under her window tc her that Mr. Ashton had returned from his nigh prowl, and the utter stillnes that pervaded the old hou warned her that the household had retired to rest.

"It is dreadfully late, and I may as well follow their example," she thought. "I wonder what makes me so wide-awake to-night? I am not in the least desirous of going to bed. Dear me, what was that?" as some strange sound broke the silence. Then she remembered that she had left Alix's door slightly ajar, and that the sound, whatever it might be, proceeded from Alix's room.

The next moment Ranee crept noiselessly to the door. The room was dark and she could detect no movement. Perhaps it was her fancy—but no, there it was again. This time she could hear it distinctly—a strangled sob, then another and another, the stifled weeping of one who fears to be overheard. In another moment Ranee had groped her way to the bedside.

"Alix dearest, what is it?" she exclaimed in a shocked voice. Then to her dismay the girl uttered a faint shriek and flung herself upon her.

"Ranee, I cannot bear it. It is cruel that I should suffer so. Oh, I know I have done wrong, but my punishment is greater than my sin. I never thought that I should have to bear this dreadful pain alone."

"Hush, darling, calm yourself and tell me all about it." Ranee spoke quietly and soothingly, but she felt sick with apprehension.

Alix seemed almost beside herself. She was holding her friend so tightly that Ranee could hardly breathe, and every word was broken with sobs. "Oh, if I could only undo it," she moaned. "Do you remember what was said about Esau, Ray? 'for he found no place of repentance, though he sought it carefully with tears," and there is no repentance for me either."

Ranee gave an involuntary shiver. It was so dark and still, and Alix's manner seemed almost distraught. Had

her brain given away from some secret trouble? But th next moment she pulled herself together. Alix must no know how she frightened her; for both their sakes sh must be brave and calm.

"It is so dreadfully dark," she said; "let me go fo a moment, Alix. I know where the matches are, an there are candles on the toilet table." But Alix refuse to relax her hold.

"No, you shall not light them. The darkness is fa better. I want you to help me, and I cannot talk in th light. Ranee, if you are not good to me I think I shal go mad. I never felt quite as I do to-night. Oh, yo do not know—— I am in despair, and I can no longe bear it alone."

"Tell me about it then, and we will bear it together." And then firmly unloosening the girl's clinging arms Ranee sat down on the bed. "Shall I guess your secret Alix? It is connected with Mrs. Lugard's stepson From your manner I fear, I very much fear tha Nicholas Lugard is your lover. Ah, I am right," a Alix pressed her hand convulsively. "Surely you hav not engaged yourself to him."

"It is worse than you think, Ranee"—in a frightene whisper—"Nicholas Lugard is my husband. I marrie him in Paris five months ago."

"Good heavens!" Ranee could say no more. In a her happy, innocent, protected life she had never know such a moment as that. The girl who had done th thing, who was living a life of deception under h father's roof, was almost her own age. "Oh," in a voi of horror, "I cannot believe it. I feel as though I we dreaming some horrid nightmare."

"It is true," returned Alix in an exhausted ton

"Give me your hand a moment. There, do you feel it? that is my wedding ring. I keep it on a chain around my neck. I am Alexandrine Lugard, Nicholas's wife;" and in spite of her pain Ranee's quick ear detected the unmistakable fondness of her tone. "Dear, dear Ranee, do not judge me until you have heard all. I have been very weak, but I was sorely tempted."

"You mean that Captain Lugard tempted you? Alix it would be better to tell me everything. How am I to help you unless I know all from the beginning? I will try not to be hard; but to act a lie like this for five months, to deceive your father—oh, Alix, how can I help feeling that you have done very, very wrong?"

"Yes, I know," and Alix buried her burning face on her friend's shoulder; "but I was so young when I first knew Nicholas—only eighteen—and I had no mother to protect me. We met at Rome first. Father was very much taken up just then. An old college friend had turned up, and they were always together; and Dawtie made herself very agreeable, and offered to chaperon me. But father had no idea that Nicholas was so much with us. I am sure now that Dawtie always told him when to come, and that she was very careful not to arouse father's suspicions, and so he had no idea that Nicholas was making love to me?"

"And Mrs. Lugard aided and abetted him?"

"I think so"—in a hesitating voice. "I was too ignorant and foolish to suspect her at the time, but of course I see things more plainly now. Dawtie is very fond of Nicholas. I think she cares more for him than she does for Bernardine, and she was always telling him that he ought to have a rich wife. She found out that I would have money of my own that mother had

left me, and that father had no other child. Oh, I know Dawtie's faults. She is very mercenary and worldly, and of course Nicholas is poor."

"Do you mean that Captain Lugard made love to you on account of your money, Alix?"

"Oh no, no," with a gasp. "How can you say anything so dreadful! Of course he cared for me really, as I cared for him. How could I help loving him, Ranee, when he is so dear and kind? Oh, if I could only make you understand all that he was to me!"

"And you engaged yourself to him?"

"No, not then. Nicholas tried hard to persuade me, but I was afraid. I knew too well that father would refuse his consent. He used to say such things about him; but I would not believe they were true."

"What sort of things, Alix?"

"Oh, I cannot remember now. But he was dreadfully down on him. He said once in my hearing that Nicholas Lugard was a feather-bed soldier and a mere loafer, and that he would never come to any good; and one day he hinted that he was far too fond of play—'he takes after his father in that,' he said; and he was always so stiff and repellent in his manner to him that Nicholas never cared to come when he was at home."

"But, Alix dear, you surely ought to have been guided by your father's opinion. Mr. Ashton must know more of the world than a girl of eighteen."

"I daresay you are right," returned Alix dejectedly. "But father is very hard sometimes, and I made up my mind that he was too severe with poor Nicholas. But all the same I was not engaged to him when we left Rome."

"But he had won your heart?"

"Oh yes," with a sigh. "I know that I could never marry any other man. If only he and Dawtie had left me alone! But the letters kept coming. He used to send notes under cover to Dawtie, and she would give them to me with a little joke. She just treated it as a flirtation, and pretended it was all fun. That was one of Dawtie's little tricks. For a long time I refused to send any answer, but they were too much for me at last. Ranee, I know how weak I have been, but I absolutely lived on those letters."

"My poor Alix!"

"Oh, you may well call me that. But let me finish the miserable story. Dawtie joined some friends at Paris and took Bernardine with her, and she induced father to bring me over. We stayed with Madame Bergère, a very old friend of his mother's. Father is very much attached to her. She is a great invalid, but is very clever and witty, and knows all the best people, and he always enjoys paying her a visit. But if only Dawtie had not induced him to leave me behind!"

"I think you told me that you were very unwell just then?"

"Yes, it was the truth, and unfortunately father could not stay. He would willingly have come back to fetch me; but Dawtie promised that when I was strong enough she would bring me home. Dawtie was really very good to me, and took no end of trouble to sit with me and amuse me. But unhappily Madame Bergère was laid up just then with one of her bad attacks, and was confined to her own room; and when Dawtie found the coast clear she brought Nicholas to see me."

"Alix, I have hardly patience to listen to you! Every word you say convinces me that Mrs. Lugard is at the

bottom of all this mischief; she is a deep, designing, unscrupulous woman."

"Oh no, Ranee dear, she is hardly so bad as all that; though she was certainly lending herself to Nicholas's schemes. But when once Nicholas got the entry to 34 Rue de Malmaison he was strong enough to do the rest. He came every day,—and—you can guess how it was. We were always together; even when I was well enough to go out with Marie—Madame Bergère's trusted *bonne* —he would waylay us. Marie was won over—over to his side, and then the rest was easy."

"Yes, I suppose so." But there was a touch of contempt in Ranee's voice that made Alix wince.

"If you loved any one you would understand—you would not judge me so hardly," returned Alix sadly. "Nicholas became my one thought; I felt I could not live without him. One day I was feeling very weak and miserable. When Marie announced him he looked very grave and determined, and said at once that he had come to have a serious talk with me. He told me that he would soon have to rejoin his regiment, and that we must be married before I left Paris. 'We are engaged now,' he said quickly 'and if we wait for Mr. Ashton's consent we shall be engaged all our lives. We love each other, and I for one will take my oath that I will never marry any one but you, Alix. Let me put it out of any one's power to separate us. The new chaplain will do the business for us, and—and we can keep the whole thing quiet until I am able to come to England. My darling, I cannot lose you, and if you love me you will do this thing.' Oh, Ranee, I was no match for him, and before he left I had promised to marry him."

Ranee suppressed a little word that rose to her lips. What was the use of saying it now?

"I suppose Mrs. Lugard was present at the ceremony?" she asked, after a moment's silence.

"No, Ranee, that is the strangest part of the story. Dawtie simply ignored the whole thing. I do not even know if she is aware that Nicholas married me. I saw very little of her the next three weeks, and when she came to see me she was always in a hurry, and Bernardine was with her. I never saw her for one moment alone until I was at the Garth, and even then she only spoke in a light, jesting way of Nicholas."

"And yet you say that Mrs. Lugard is not a double-faced, unscrupulous woman!" exclaimed Ranee in a voice of strong indignation.

"Hush, Ranee, you are speaking so loudly, and Binney's room is next to mine, and she always sleeps with her window open. Strange and incredible as it may seem to you, I am not sure that Dawtie knows about the marriage even now. She is a singular little person, and never sees anything that she does not want to see. She was ready to help Nicholas to a certain point; but she is a great coward, and the fear of consequences would make her draw back. Dear as Nicholas is to her, and much as she wanted him to marry me, she would not have had the nerve to openly abet him. Only Marie Durand and Nicholas's friend Captain Montague and his sister were in the chapel that morning. Dawtie never came near me that day, neither did I see her until Nicholas took me to the station to meet her and Bernardine, as we were to travel to England together. I thought she seemed a little nervous, and was rather inclined to be cross with me, because I seemed out of

spirits. 'If you look so lugubrious, Alix,' she observed, 'our fellow-passengers will think that you and Nick are lovers.' And then she gave a heartless little laugh—you know her way. There, I have told you everything,"—in a tired voice—"and now what am I to do? Nicholas may be here any day, and then he will have to speak to father."

"You will not wait for that, Alix, surely? Have you not carried this deception long enough? Your plain duty is to confess everything to your father. Tell him that you have been disobedient and disloyal and untrue, and implore his forgiveness. Oh, my poor dear, I know how terrible this will be to you, but indeed it must be done."

"I would rather die," returned Alix in a voice of despair. "Ranee, you do not know father; if there is anything in the world that he loathes, it is deception and want of truth. When he is deceived by one whom he trusts he has no pity or mercy; he is as hard as granite, and as cold. I believe," dropping her voice into a whisper, "that mother did something to offend him. Oh, I know nothing definite, but she was not happy, neither was he. And yet when she died his grief was terrible; I think for a whole year I never saw him smile."

Ranee was silent for a moment. Her heart was full of pity for the unhappy girl, but her sense of right was strong; for Alix's sake she must be firm.

"Dear, he is your father," she said gently, "and surely he has a right to be angry; for five months you have been living under his roof and acting a lie. Oh, forgive me if I speak plainly, but it is the truth and you know it. The one thing to soften his just resentment would

he for you to confess everything. Do not leave it for Captain Lugard, I implore you, it would only widen the breach—tell him yourself." But Ranee might as well have spoken to the wind.

"You are right—I know you are right," sobbed Alix, "but I cannot do it—I cannot—the words would die on my lips. I know just how he would look, and the tone of voice in which he would order me out of his presence. If I told him I was married he would not hear another word. I should have to keep to my room, for he would refuse to eat with me. Ranee, I say again you do not know father, and I would rather die than do as you would have me."

Ranee was becoming worn out with her long vigil; they had talked for hours, and already there was a faint gray light on the horizon that heralded the summer dawn, and the twittering of drowsy birds under the eaves.

"Some one must tell him," she returned impatiently, "and it must not be Captain Lugard. Surely you would not have your husband ordered out of the house or exposed to a terrible scene! There might be ill blood between them—cruel words said that could never be forgotten or forgiven, and it would be your fault, Alix."

"Oh, I never thought of that," returned Alix, in a frightened voice. "Nicholas is very passionate and headstrong. Ranee, will you be my friend and tell father yourself? You will have nothing to fear for your own sake, and he will listen to you, and you might soften things a little. Tell him——" But Ranee interrupted her almost irritably.

"You need not tell me what to say," she returned curtly. "If I do this for your sake, Alix, I think you

can trust me to do it as well as I can. It will not b
easy task, and I don't mind telling you that it m
me rather sick to think of it. But there, I can tall
more. I am going to give you a little sal-volatile,
then we will both try to get some sleep;" and Ra
voice was so full of unutterable weariness that
was obliged to let her go. And as Ranee kissed her
whispered one question, "Shall you tell him
morrow?" But Ranee's answer made her almost j

"I shall tell him to-day. I will not go to my
another night until he knows all that he ought to kn

Chapter XXI

UNDER THE LOW APPLE TREES

He writhed, then sternly manned his heart
To play his hard but destined part.
Lord of the Isles.

Leave me one little hour in peace.
Rokeby.

THE long hours of storm and stress had so exhausted lix that Ranee knew that some stimulant was necessary keep off another attack of faintness, but such was her ıartan endurance that she refused to touch it herself. ³eter never likes us to take anything of the kind less we are ill," she said, pushing away the glass. ɔrink it, Alix, and then perhaps you will be able to ep." But as she mentioned the beloved name the tears se to Ranee's eyes, and as she hurriedly undressed little oking sobs came in her throat. "How sorry Peter ›uld be for her if he knew! How he would pet her d call her 'Baby Ra'—the name he still used at times. :ter would say I was right to do it," she thought, as e laid an aching head on the pillow, and one of his emorable speeches came back to her, 'When you funk thing, stand up to it and double your fists; there is ›thing like showing that you mean to fight for it. It not always wise to let the enemy attack first; hit out, ıd get through with it.' And again, 'Tell the truth, tle 'un, and shame the devil; there never was more

than one right and one wrong road, and there is no betwixt and between whatsoever, young woman;' for Peter loved to deliver brief and homely bits and scraps of philosophy to the bunch of girls who, literally and metaphorically, sat at his feet. 'Peter never would show when he funked anything,' was her last waking thought. If her mother could have seen her then she would have smiled still more blissfully in her celestial resting-place; for Ranee slept as placidly as a worn-out child, dreaming happily and oblivious of a troubled waking. 'Ranee never looks such a dear as when she is asleep,' Sallie had observed once—a speech that had tickled Ranee immensely when she had heard it.

But it was a sober and anxious little face, and a somewhat downcast one, that confronted the Squire at the breakfast-table; and when he questioned her about Alix, her replies were so hesitating and unsatisfactory that he looked at her in surprise.

"Are you keeping anything from me?" he said at last rather impatiently. "If Alix is really ill I will go up to her at once, and we will have Dr. Weston;" and he half-rose from his chair.

"Oh, no," returned Ranee, rather frightened at this "Alix has had a bad night, and of course her head aches but Mrs. Binney told me that she was dozing a little."

"I can't think what ails the child," muttered Mr Ashton, as he resumed his seat; "she has never seemed the same since that trip to Paris." Then, as he noticed Ranee's evident nervousness, "You don't seem quite fit yourself this morning, Miss Holt?"

"I did not sleep well either," returned Ranee truthfully; "something was troubling me. Mr. Ashton rather abruptly, "if you are not busy after breakfa-

there is something I want to tell you—something that is worrying me dreadfully."

"Then I wish I were at leisure," he returned kindly, for there was something so wistful and childlike in Ranee's manner that his sympathy was at once aroused; he had never spoken so gently to her before. "If only I had not this appointment with Sir Heber, but I am afraid that I cannot be back until luncheon."

"I must wait then," returned Ranee disconsolately; for how was she to get through the morning with this dreadful ordeal before her.

"I shall be quite at your service this afternoon, and we will have our palaver in the armoury"—a name Ranee had given to the library. But Mr. Ashton's amused smile met with no response; and as he looked at her rather keenly, he saw her lips quiver slightly.

He took no apparent notice, however; but as he folded his paper and collected his letters he said quietly, "You will find it very pleasant in the orchard this morning, there is nothing like air and sunshine for driving away worries;" and then he gave her a friendly nod and withdrew. But as he rode in the direction of Godstone Park he was haunted by the vision of a pale, weary little face with soft, wistful eyes. "What could be troubling the child?" he thought, and a vague longing to help and comfort her seemed tugging at his heart-strings. No man was ever more loyal to his friends than Roger Ashton, or more generous and ready to help in the hour of trouble.

Alix was still sleeping when Ranee went upstairs, so she left a message for her with Mrs. Binney. "Tell her when she wakes that Mr. Ashton has gone over to Godstone Park, and will not be back until luncheon; and that

I shall be in the orchard, unless she sends for me." Ar
then rather languidly she looked out a book for herself
the library, and went in search of a secluded and sha
nook which she and Alix generally selected. Floss
who had taken a fancy to her, accompanied her of h
own accord.

There was a corner of the orchard where a group
mossy and gnarled old apple trees stood apart from t
younger and fruit-bearing trees. Long ago they h
passed their prime, and looked shrunk and hoary w
age—"the Seven Old Sisters" Alix used to call them
but still each spring they were clothed in leafage, and
summer mornings it was delightful to sit in the gre
shade. A few weeks before, Mr. Ashton, who kn
Alix's fondness for the spot, had put up a little rus
seat and table under the most ancient of the Siste
and a pair of tame robins, who had built their nest in t
orchard year after year, often haunted the spot. B
beautiful as it looked on this summer morning, Rane
heart was too full of anxious foreboding to feel its soo
ing influence. For nature needs "a heart at leis
from itself," and when the brain is vexed with the tan
of circumstance and the major or minor worries of li
when things have gone contrary, and there is flurry a
disorder in the inner citadel, where all might be qu
and at peace—then even the warmth of the sunshi
that enfolds us, and the sweet scent of the thymy ban
and the music from a hundred unseen vocalists, will
to cheer and exhilarate the worn spirits; we have l
as it were the keynote to the harmonies of nature. A
so it was with Ranee that morning. Her book lay
heeded on the table before her, and her bright-eyed ro
who perched on a low branch beside her was equa

noticed. Through the long vista of apple and pear trees she could catch distant glimpses of the red walls of the Garth. "The house of ancient peace," she had called it that first day, not thinking of the unconscious irony of her words. There was little doubt that Alix's confession had given Ranee a shock, from the consequences of which she would be slow to recover. It was not that either Ranee or her sisters were absolutely ignorant of the evil as well as the good of the world, the environment of the Red House was far too natural and healthy to allow any such false or morbid view of life. They were no milk-and-water misses to draw their garments aside from every dark shadow on their path; even in Abbey-Thorpe there were sinners and wrong-doing, and sometimes the sisters would talk softly in the twilight of some sad story that had reached their ear. But such wrong-doing as Alix had confessed seemed to strike cold to Ranee's very soul; her weakness and disloyalty to her father were simply dreadful to her. That she should have deceived him all these months; that she should have called herself Alexandrine Ashton when she knew herself to be Nicholas Lugard's wife—all this was almost inconceivable to Ranee's sturdy honesty and sense of right. The miserable vacillation and duplicity, the hundred mean acts and unuttered lies that must have been needed to guard her secret! Truly might the wise man say that "the way of transgressors is hard," and doubtless poor Alix had found her daily path thickly strewn with thorns. But this morning Ranee was thinking less of her than of Roger Ashton. How would his man's pride and instinct of fatherhood meet such a shock? Too well she knew that his nature was a difficult one—that he was keen to feel and slow to

forgive. His very love for his only child would add fuel to his wrath.

"How am I to tell him? It was cruel of Alix to give me such miserable work to do for her," thought Ranee, who was working herself into a fever. And then she suddenly grasped the table before her with both hands, for there, hours before she expected him, was Mr. Ashton walking quickly towards her from the direction of the house. He called to her in a cheery voice before he could see her face.

"Here I am, Miss Holt. After all, I found the business was not important, so I asked Sir Heber to let me come another day instead. Well," looking round him with a glance of satisfaction, "the 'Seven Sisters' bower is really a charming nook. Alix would like a hammock or two for afternoon siestas, I know." Then, as he came nearer and caught sight of Ranee's strained expression, he stopped and looked at her gravely.

"What is it, my dear child?" he said, sitting down beside her; and he would have taken her hand, only Ranee shrank away from him.

"Don't," she said, and now she was trembling from head to foot—"don't be too kind to me, when I am going to hurt you so. Mr. Ashton," as she saw his surprised start at this, "I have to tell you something that will give you pain, and the thought frightens me."

"Do you mean that you are frightened at the idea of giving me pain?" There was infinite gentleness in his tone, and for a moment his hand lay lightly over hers.

"Yes," she whispered, but she could not look at him: "I am afraid for you and Alix too." Then at the mention of his daughter he suddenly straightened himself, and a shadow crossed his face.

"It is about Alix then?"

"Yes."

"Something that I ought to know—that," his suspicion aroused by her manner, "I have a right to know?" Then, as she still seemed unwilling to speak, "Is it anything connected with her health?"

"No," as though helped by the unexpected question. "Alix is not strong; but her trouble is mental, not physical, Mr. Ashton. She is very unhappy." Then he seemed to stiffen at once.

"You need not tell me; I think I can guess what you mean," and an ominous frown came to his brow. "So the affair has gone farther than I thought; I imagined that it was only a childish fancy that would die a natural death. Do you mean that the fellow—I am speaking of Nicholas Lugard—actually dared to make love to my daughter?"

"Most certainly he made love to her, and I grieve to tell you, Mr. Ashton, that Alix returns his affection."

"Tut, nonsense," contemptuously. "Alix is not such a fool. Lugard is a good-looking fellow though he is a scamp, and I daresay she fancies herself in love. I hope," turning to her rather peremptorily, "that you have not encouraged her in such folly. I should not like to think that you were on Nicholas Lugard's side."

"Who—I?" stammered Ranee, quite taken aback at this. "What can you mean, Mr. Ashton? I have never seen Captain Lugard in my life. I know nothing about him, and I never knew until last night that he was the cause of Alix's unhappiness."

"Well, well, I believe you," impatiently, for Ranee's voice rang true to his ears. He knew instinctively that those clear, honest eyes could never deceive. "You can

go on with your story now. We will take the beginning as granted. Alix is making herself miserable because she believes herself in love with Nicholas Lugard, who, scoundrel that he is, has been trying to win her affections behind my back; this is the truth, is it not?" waiting for her reply.

"It is true as far as it goes, but——"

"One moment, please," in a judicial tone. "You shall tell me everything later—as soon as I can muster patience to hear you—but I must say one thing first. By listening to this young man Alix has been guilty of direct disobedience. I have warned her in plain words to have as little as possible to do with him. 'Mrs. Lugard is a pleasant little woman,' I said to her, 'and she is the mistress of her brother's house, and I have no objection to your being on friendly terms with her; but her stepson is a *mauvais sujet*, he is a loafer and a ne'er-do-well, with few virtues to counterbalance his vices, and remember that I will not allow you to be much at Godstone when he is there.' Those were my very words; Alix will endorse them."

"You were right—oh, of course you were right!" returned Ranee in a low voice.

"You think so—you do me justice in that?" almost eagerly. "You are a sensible girl, and yet Alix thought I was stern and arbitrary."

"You were neither." Ranee's honesty would not allow her to defend her friend at the expense of truth. "It was Alix who was to blame—she ought to have obeyed you. But, Mr. Ashton, I must say it—it was a great mistake to leave Alix in Mrs. Lugard's care."

"Do you mean that I ought not to have trusted her?" with an anxious frown.

"Yes, that is what I do mean. I am afraid Mrs. Lugard is not as straight as you believe her to be. It was she who brought Captain Lugard to the Rue de Malmaison. Madame Bergère was ill and confined to her room, and there was no one to protect Alix; he came every day, and she saw him alone, and——"

"And she engaged herself to him—is that what you have to tell me?" in a voice so shrill and angry that the robin who was watching them from a branch over their heads flew away in alarm.

"Oh, it is worse, far worse than you think," returned Ranee, breathless with nervousness. "What is the use of trying to prepare you when it must be told? Alix married him—she married Captain Lugard five months ago; she showed me her wedding ring." But Mr. Ashton put up his hand as though to stop her; perhaps at that moment he could not speak; but that sudden silence seemed awful to Ranee.

That the shock was utterly unexpected, that he had never expected such a climax to her story, was evident from his sudden paleness; but he was a strong man, and the next minute he pulled himself together, only his voice sounded hard and metallic.

"And the marriage took place in Paris? Of course Mrs. Lugard was present?"

"Indeed she was not," returned Ranee hurriedly. "That is the strangest part of all. She utterly ignored the whole thing; she never came near Alix if she could help it; from all I can gather she pretends to know nothing about it."

"May I ask, then, who witnessed the ceremony?" in an icy tone.

"Only a friend of Captain Lugard, Captain Mon-

tague, and his sister and Marie Durand. The next day Mrs. Lugard brought Alix back to England. Mr. Ashton, that is all I can tell you about the matter. I wanted Alix to say all this herself, but she had not the nerve. Oh, if you knew how unhappy she is! The thought of your anger nearly breaks her heart. All these months she has suffered cruelly." But again he lifted that rigid right hand to enforce silence.

"You need say no more; you must leave me to deal with Alix. You have done your part, and I thank you. Now we will end this conversation, and you must permit me to retire. The blow has been a severe one, and I must take counsel with myself."

"But you will give me some message for Alix?"

"No, there is nothing to say; only that it would have been better for both of us if she had told me this thing five months ago."

"But you will forgive her? Oh, Mr. Ashton"—and in her earnestness Ranee pressed closer to him and laid her hand on his arm; her eyes were full of tears—"if she has done wrong she has suffered cruelly." But there was no softening of the stern features.

"That is the only message I can give. Stay"—here his face darkened—"bid her not presume to come into my presence until I send for her, but that will not be yet." And then he quickly disengaged himself from the girl's grasp, and walked with bent head under the low apple trees in the direction of the house.

Chapter XXII

"IT WAS A HEAVY BLOW"

How can her feebleness sustain
This last new stroke of grief?
The storm she dreaded breaks at last—
God send her soul relief!

ANON.

RANEE was not easily moved to tears. As Peter once observed, in his usual graphic manner, "Ra never turned on the water-tap as other people did"—with a jeering glance at Vera—"watering the place and making their neighbours feel damp and uncomfortable." Nevertheless, as Mr. Ashton's tall figure disappeared under the apple trees, she indulged in a hearty fit of crying, which relieved the severe tension and did her a world of good.

"It was all so tragic and miserable and hopeless," she said to herself—"a tangle that could never really be straightened out." But, strange to say, her heart ached more for the deceived father than for the unhappy little culprit. "Oh, I am so sorry for him," she kept saying over and over to herself. "I know what that stony look means—that he is feeling it dreadfully. If I were in Alix's place I think I should run away; I could not face his anger. If he ever brings himself to forgive her, it will not be for a long time; and I doubt if things will ever be the same between them. Oh, if I could only go home to my dear Vera and Peter; for it is too dreadful

to be mixed up with an affair like this, and I can do nothing for either of them."

These sad reflections occupied Ranee for more than an hour, and then with an effort she pulled herself together. The luncheon gong would soon sound; she must try to steal unperceived to her own room and bathe her eyes. "When people seldom cried, their eyelids always got so puffed and red," she thought.

Fortune favoured her, and she had made herself presentable before the gong sounded. On her way downstairs she encountered Mrs. Binney.

"Miss Alix has been dozing most of the morning," she observed, "but she is getting up now. She was asking for you half-an-hour ago, and I told her that you were not in the house."

"I will come to her directly after luncheon," returned Ranee hurriedly. But at the foot of the staircase Walton waylaid her.

"I have just taken the Squire's luncheon to the library, ma'am. He begs me to say that he does not wish to be interrupted, and that he hopes you will excuse him."

"Very well, Walton." And then Ranee went to the dining-room in a subdued frame of mind to try and eat her food, but conscious all the time of the old butler's disapproving and reproachful surveillance; for Walton, who was an old retainer, was always injured if the good things provided were not enjoyed.

At another time Ranee would have been amused by the seductive manner in which the salmon mayonnaise was handed to her; and when the galantine of veal was declined he looked at her with solemn sadness.

"I don't think I want my luncheon to-day, Walton," she said at last. "If you will give me some more water,

hall not need anything more;" and then Ranee es-ed. Walton looked ruefully at her plate.

'I don't know what the Squire would say," he mbled; "a healthy girl ought not to be off her feed : that. If it were our Miss Alix now, who never ks more than a bird—but Miss Holt;" and Walton ok his grey head as he bade James clear the table.

Ranee had no intention of going to Alix for another rter of an hour, as she would hardly expect her quite soon; but to her surprise, as she entered the Dame's om, she heard the tapping of Alix's stick in the ante-m, for she had recently discarded her crutches—and next moment she appeared at the open door.

'May I sit in your room a little, Ranee—I don't want go downstairs yet?" And then, as Ranee settled her nfortably in the window-seat, she said rather anx-sly, "Surely you have been very quick over luncheon? uppose," hesitating a little, "that father is back?"

'Oh yes, he is back." And then Ranee added, "He ne back two or three hours ago."

'Do you mean you have told him already?" in a rtled tone, and Ranee nodded.

Alix gave a quick gasp. "Come and sit down here ide me. Why do you look like that, Ranee? your ner frightens me. And surely—oh yes, I see plainly t you have been crying. Oh, I was right, and he will er forgive me!" and Alix rocked herself in misery. peak—speak; your silence is worse than anything."

'If I had only something comforting to say," returned nee sadly. "Yes, I told him everything. He came to in the orchard, and I told him all from the begin-g. But it was hard work, for I could not get him understand. He thought you were only engaged to

Captain Lugard; and when he grasped the truth, the shock was so great that he could not speak. His face grew quite white and drawn."

"Oh, poor father!"

"It was a heavy blow, and for the moment it nearly stunned him," went on Ranee. "Dear, I must not hide from you that he is very unhappy. When he walked away from me he stooped as though he had suddenly grown old, and as though the pain were hard to bear." Then Alix started up impulsively. Her weak, facile nature was touched by this description.

"Oh I never thought of this!" she exclaimed. "I was so terrified at the idea of his anger that I forgot how sorry he would be. Oh, I have been selfish as well as cowardly. Let me go to him now, at once; he is in the library, I know. Let me go, and perhaps he will forgive me." But Ranee only shook her head.

"You must not go to him—you dare not. Sit down again, Alix; I have not given you his message. I asked him to send you a word, but he answered that there was nothing to say—only that it would have been better for both of you had you told him this thing five months ago."

"Was that all?" and Alix actually looked relieved. "I thought it would have been much worse than that. You must not keep me, Ranee. After all, he is my father; and he has no child but me. I am not afraid now, and he knows all. I will go and humble myself to him."

"No, Alix, you must not do so yet; for this was not all his message. "Bid her not presume to enter my presence until I send for her, and that will not be yet." Then Alix shivered a little in spite of the heat.

"Oh, Ranee, did he say that?"

"Indeed he did, and if you disobey the injunction

will not answer for the consequences. He has shut himself up in the library and will see no one. Alix, you must give him time—you must wait until he sends for you."

"'And that will not be yet,'" and Alix wrung her hands in despair. It was evident that her little stock of courage was exhausted—that she had mentally and bodily collapsed in a moment. She broke into weak sobs. This was the outraged parent that she had dreaded, the stern judge who was to pronounce her sentence: "Bid her not presume to enter my presence." Oh how hard and cruel those words sounded!"

"Dear Alix, you can surely wait a little." Then Alix flashed into futile wrath.

"He has no right to treat me like a child now he knows I am a married woman. He is condemning me to remain in my room, and what will Binney and Walton think! The whole household will know I am in disgrace! Ranee, even a worm will turn, and I cannot bear this. I will write to Nicholas to take me away anywhere—it does not matter where. But oh, I forgot—not even Dawtie knows where he is now. He may come any day, or he may stay away for another week or so. Oh, why are people so cruel to me! Even Nicholas is inconsiderate, and lets it all fall on me."

Alix, always in extremes, was becoming hysterical in her frightened misery, and needed a strong hand. Ranee vaguely felt this.

"You must not exaggerate things," she said quietly. "You are not just to your father, Alix. You have deceived him all these months, and yet you expect him to get over his anger in a moment. Why should you say you are shut up in your room, because your father does

not wish to see you yet? The door is open, and there is no reason why you should not go into the drawing-room as usual, unless you are afraid of visitors."

"Oh, I could not be there. Suppose Dawtie were to come—you know I could not see her. Let me stay here, Ranee; it is nice and cool, and I feel safer here."

"Well, to-day if you like. But there is the morning-room; you would be safe there. Or I could find you a secluded corner in the orchard. If visitors come I can tell them you are not well. It will be the truth, for if you work yourself up like this you will be ill again."

"How can I help it when my father is so cruel!" returned Alix with another burst of tears. "Ranee, you are trying to make the best of things; but if I am not to enter his presence, he will not let me sit opposite to him at meals, and then Walton and James must know; and he may refuse to see me for days."

Ranee was silent for a moment. She knew that this might be the case, and that in his present mood it was quite likely that he might refuse to allow his daughter to be present at the family meals; or that, if this should not be feasible, and for the sake of appearances he should insist on her being there, the situation would surely be intolerable. She could see no way out of the difficulty; but it would never do to let Alix suspect her uneasiness.

"It is no use making the worst of things," she said soothingly. "You must try to be patient, Alix. Yes, you shall stay here this evening if you like; it is very cool and pleasant at this window. Why should you not write a little note to your father, and tell him how sorry you are for the pain you have given him?"

"Oh, do you think he would read my letter?" and there was a faint gleam of hope in Alix's eyes."

"Why should he not read it? Tell him all that is in your heart, and ask him to forgive you your deceit. You cannot humble yourself too much, Alix, for indeed you have done very wrong."

"Do you think I do not know that! But even you are hard on me;" and Alix spoke in a hurt voice.

"There, write your letter, dear, and I will leave you in peace. It will be better for me to go downstairs in case any one calls." But to Ranee's relief there was no visitor to the Garth that afternoon.

When she went upstairs two hours later to dress for dinner, the letter was only just finished. Alix looked flushed and weary as she thrust the sheet into the envelope.

"I have been trying to write it all this time," she said in a stifled voice. "I have made a dozen attempts, but have only torn them all up. I wanted to say so much, but the words would not get themselves written."

"So you wrote only a short note?"

"Yes, it is very short, but I think he will understand how I feel;" and Alix's tone was rather peculiar.

Long afterwards Ranee saw that note, and the tears flushed to her eyes as she read it.

"My own dear father," it began, "there is only one thing that I can say——" and here the sentence broke off abruptly. Then in trembling handwriting were hastily scrawled a few words: "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before thee, and am not worthy to be called thy child. Your unhappy

"ALIX."

If only that note had reached Roger Ashton earlier, he would not have spent that long night pacing his library in bitterness of spirit, and saying over and over to himself, "Twice deceived—mother and daughter,

wife and child; first Olive and now Alix. Is there no faith and truth in women?" The shadows seemed closing round him as he sank back in his chair, worn with the exhaustion from his own fierce emotion, while the mailed hand of the man in armour pointed stiffly to the bowed head beneath. He had eaten little and wearied himself greatly, and the weight of a heavy sadness seemed to crush him as he sat there. Was there to be no woman's faith or loyalty for him!

Then, as he closed his aching eyes, a face seemed to rise before him—a young, earnest face with brown eyes brimming in tears. He was in the orchard, under the "Seven Old Sisters," and a girl's hand was holding his arm. "You must forgive her," the wistful voice was saying; "if she has done wrong, she has suffered cruelly;" and then one large, bright tear had dropped on his coat-sleeve.

Thank God, there was one honest, true-hearted woman in the world! He had dimly guessed that fact when he had first seen Ranee Holt, but he was sure of it now. What was it she had said to him when he had first sat down beside her, with the vague idea of comforting her in her trouble? "Don't be too kind to me, when I am going to hurt you so. I have to tell you something that will give you pain, and the thought frightens me;" and as she spoke her face was full of trouble.

"Dear child, she is sorry for me;" and in the shadowed light his face softened a little. "God bless her for her sweet compassion!" he said to himself, and something of the strain of that bitter loneliness seemed lifted. And all the time, unknown to him, Alix's little note lay close beside him, hidden under some pamphlets that he had thrown down in the dusk.

Chapter XXIII

"THERE'S RUE FOR YOU"

Thou hast been blest if never bent
 Thine head, in anguish low,
To hide the trembling lip, the tears
 That harsh words caused to flow;
Striving in vain to mask the pain
 Veiled by thy silent pride,
The faint smile of the blanching lip,
 That strove the pang to hide.

ANNA SHIPTON.

RANEE did not see Mr. Ashton again that night. Mrs. Binney brought her a message from him. He asked her to excuse his absence, as he was going out and would not return until late.

She dined in solitary state, for Alix absolutely refused to bear her company; but this time Walton was more satisfied with the results of her efforts. And then, as Alix was worn out and only fit for bed, she and Flossie went out into the garden.

It was a lovely evening. The heat of a late July day was replaced by a delicious coolness; the breeze that blew softly in her face seemed to waft to her the rich fragrance of carnations, which had always been a specialty of the Garth garden. The great beds of dark red clove carnations lay on one side of the house. The moon was rising, and the long white winding road beyond the gates looked most inviting. There was no one in sight;

no rustic lover and his lass sauntering towards the village. Ranee was unusually restless, and as she softly unlatched the gate, Flossie gave a short bark of delight. "Hush, Flossie, I don't want any one to hear us," observed Ranee, and the intelligent creature sobered down at once. But they had hardly crossed the road when a cyclist came sharply round the corner, and then suddenly wheeled up in astonishment. It was Peter!

"Why, it is the little 'un!" he exclaimed in a tone of unmitigated surprise, as he jumped lightly down. "May I ask why you are wandering about the roads at this hour, young woman?" but he gave her a mighty hug all the same.

"Oh, Peter, to think it is really you!" returned Ranee ecstatically, "and I was so longing for the sight of a home face. Oh, how nice you look, dear," stroking his sleeve, for Peter was certainly very trim and smart this evening. There was a flower in his grey coat, and an unusual brightness in his aspect. Not that Peter was ever glum, though he had his moods like other people, but to-night evidently things had gone well with him.

"Shut up your blarney," was all his reply to Ranee's admiring speech, "and tell me why you and Flossie are wandering about alone in this fashion?"

"Mr. Ashton is out, and Alix has gone to bed, and I felt restless and longing for a walk." But this piece of information did not seem to please Peter.

"In bed? Why, it is not quite nine. Oh yes, there it is striking, Ra. Don't you let Miss Ashton get invalid fads into her head. I'll be bound she was not down very early this morning? She wants to be braced up mentally and bodily."

"Alix has not been quite the thing all day," returned

Lanee; and she would have changed the subject, only 'eter took hold of her. The next moment, unfortuately, the moon peeped from behind a cloud, and Peter's lue eyes were remarkably keen.

"What's up, Ra? You are down in the dumps this vening. Why, you silly little goose," as her head rooped, "do you mean that you are homesick?"

"I think I am a little, Peter," returned Ranee truthully. "I could not help feeling rather dull to-night, nd longing for you and Vera. Alix is very nice, but she s not like my dear Vera, and——"

"I will tell her to come over to-morrow and bring allie. I thought you were having such a good old me;" and Peter's voice was full of concern. To think f the child being homesick! Peter felt touched and ttered. "Cheer up, little 'un, the girls shall be round the afternoon."

"Oh no, not to-morrow, Peter." Ranee grew sudenly nervous. "I don't think Alix will want them toorrow. I—they—oh, I can't explain. Thank you very uch for your kind thought, dear, but I think it will be etter not to have them just now."

Peter gave a low whistle. There was a screw loose omewhere. Ranee was too honest to be a good actor, nd he saw plainly that something was amiss.

"You have not got into any trouble—with the Ashons, I mean?"

"I?" staring at him. "Oh no, Peter. I cannot deny hat I am very much worried, but the trouble is none f my making."

"But you could tell me about it?" Peter was getting urious. "We have always been such chums, Ra." But le girl shook her head.

"It is not my business," she said sadly, "and I must not say a word even to you. I have had a trying day and this is the first comfortable moment I have had. Let me walk a little way down the road with you. The air is so sweet, and it does me good to be with you." Then, as he wheeled his bicycle slowly round, she walked beside him, questioning him about his day's work, and asking after her friends; and Peter good-naturedly gave her all the information she needed.

"You saw Miss Weston the day before yesterday," he observed, "so I have nothing fresh to tell you about Wynyards."

"No, of course not; but you might give news of Hannah, she has not been near us for the last fortnight."

"Indeed! Look out for that snag, Ra; it is rather dark under those trees."

"Oh, I see it all right," rather impatiently. "But about Hannah. Both Alix and I have been wondering over her silence. She came so often—every three or four days—and then her visits all at once ceased!"

"Miss Burke is very busy," replied Peter. "I gave her a new case the other day. I daresay she will turn up all right."

"And she is well and happy?"

"She is certainly well; indeed I may say that her health is all that can be desired. When I see her again I will put your second question to her: 'Ra wants to know if you are happy?' I hope she won't think us both rather impertinent."

"Peter, how can you be so absurd! But you may give her my love."

"Very well. Now, my dear, we will turn round and make tracks for the Garth. I am going to take you to

e gate, and then I must hurry home;" and Ranee did
t venture to oppose this.

"It has been so lovely having you to myself," she said,
she put up her face to be kissed. "You are such a
mp of comfort, Peter. You know I always say so."
id then Peter laughed and rode away. "It was good
him not to question too closely," she said to herself
she walked up the drive. "Peter has such a sense of
nour. He knows that I ought not repeat anything that
es on under this roof. I could see he was curious—
is always so interested about Alix." But Ranee
hed as she thought of her futile little dream, and how
possible it was that Alix could ever be her sister-in-
v. Much as she loved her, and in spite of her sweet-
is, she no longer thought her worthy of Peter.

Mr. Ashton was in his usual place at the breakfast-
le. His greeting was somewhat silent, and there was
le or no conversation between them. He opened his
ers and read his paper, only offering a brief remark
the fineness of the day. Ranee thought he looked worn
l ill.

There was no mention of Alix. Just before he left the
om he asked Ranee if she would care to have a drive
t evening; but it was impossible to give him any
swer to this without consulting Alix.

"I could tell you at luncheon," she said hurriedly, and
e saw at once that he understood. He paused for a
oment with the door in his hand, but she could not see
s face.

"Will you be good enough to tell Alix that I will see
r in the library as soon as luncheon is over?" And
thout waiting for her reply, he closed the door.

Ranee did not give the message at once; she waited

until Alix was settled under the shade of the "Seven Sisters." "I am so glad you wrote that letter, dear," she said gently, as she repeated it; "I am sure it has done good." And Ranee's words comforted Alix greatly. But they neither of them guessed that the poor little note still lay unread under the heap of pamphlets.

Ranee did her best to raise her friend's flagging spirits, but as the morning wore away Alix grew more nervous. "I shall say the wrong thing," she observed once. "When father is stern with me I can do nothing but cry, and that always makes him still more angry. He hates me to be afraid of him, but how am I to help it?"

"It seems hardly natural to fear your own father, Alix."

"I used to think mother was afraid of him too," returned the girl in a low voice. "She never seemed quite happy and at her ease when he was in the room. He would look at her sometimes as though her manner hurt him, and then he would go away and leave us together. I was not more than eleven when she died."

"And you were very fond of her, Alix?"

"Oh yes, I loved her dearly; and she was so beautiful. Young as I was, I used to sit and gaze at her as though she were a picture. But she was never bright and merry as most mothers are, and I never remember her playing with me. She used to work a great deal such lovely embroideries; I will show you them some day. I remember once——" but here Alix stopped as though she were afraid of saying too much. But Ranee was listening with such eager interest that she went on:

"I was in the window recess at the end of the drawing-room playing with my doll when father came in one afternoon. I am sure now that he did not see me. He

voice sounded worried and impatient. 'Always at work, Olive,' I heard him say. 'It is wrong to waste this lovely day indoors. Put on your hat and I will drive you out in the phaeton. I have to go over to Croft Farm.' But mother shook her head. 'I would rather not drive this evening, Roger, I am so tired.' 'Of course you are tired,' he returned angrily, 'moping in this hot room day after day. You have no regard for your health, Olive, any more than you have for my wishes.' But here, I think, mother must have made a sign that they were not alone, for he muttered something and left the room. I can hear her sigh now. Perhaps I ought not to have told you this, Ranee?"

"I shall not repeat it." And then Alix went back to the subject of her own troubles. Ranee let her talk; she thought it better that she should have an outlet for her emotion.

Ranee was thankful when the gong summoned her to the house. It was at least a change of miseries, though the silent meal and the Squire's grave face were not cheerful. As soon as luncheon was over Ranee went in search of Alix.

"I suppose you have given my message?" Mr. Ashton asked as they rose from the table.

"Oh yes, I gave it. I think she is in the morning-room, but I will go and see." For she had begged Alix to follow her to the house.

Alix had eaten nothing. She was standing by the window leaning on her stick. She looked white and miserable, but she said no word.

"He is waiting for you, dear," observed Ranee gently. "You must be brave and patient, Alix. Remember you have done wrong and that he is your father, and that he

knows you are sorry." But Alix's only answer was a sigh. To-day was not yesterday, and her courage had ebbed away.

Ranee wandered restlessly in the garden and orchard until the heat drove her indoors, and then she went to her room. Alix would come to her there, she knew. What a long time it seemed—one hour and then the quarter chimed before she heard the sound of the opening door. But she was wrong, Alix made no attempt to come to her. Was it possible that she had no good news to impart?

"May I come in, dear?" she asked anxiously; but there was no reply, the girl had not heard her. She had thrown herself upon the couch, and was lying there shaking with tearless sobs from head to foot. It was no use asking her questions. Ranee could only try to soothe and comfort her. She sat beside her holding her hand and now and then stroking her fair hair, until the nervous paroxysm passed and she became calmer. And all the time she was saying to herself, "I am sorry for him too; but why is he so hard to her? She is such a child, and she was in bad hands. What should we do, poor sinful creatures," she went on, "if our Heavenly Father refused to forgive us?" and her heart grew very pitiful for Alix. Presently she slipped away and returned with a cup of tea and a sandwich.

"You have eaten nothing since breakfast and it is past four," she said gently but firmly. "You must take what I have brought you or I shall fetch Mrs. Binney." And this threat was so salutary that Alix swallowed the food.

Ranee was wonderfully patient with her. Neither then nor afterwards did she ever fully know what passed between Alix and her father. That in some manner he

ıust have emptied the vials of his wrath upon her erring ead was evident from her crushed condition, but how ılix had defended herself, and what sort of confession he had made, was known only to herself.

Later on in the evening she repeated fragments of their onversation.

"Was it so very bad?" Ranee had whispered as they ad sat together in the Dame's Room in the twilight.

"Oh, don't ask me!" the girl had returned. "It was ar, far worse than I feared. I think his heart must have ɐen a stone. And after that letter, too!"

"Did he mention it, Alix?"

"No; he treated it with silent contempt. When I ɹied to tell him how sorry I was, he said that my future ɔonduct must prove my penitence, and that I must earn his forgiveness." But Alix forbore to repeat the words which had stung her so cruelly.

"If I were to tell you to-day that I forgive you because you are my daughter, I should lie. Your disobedience might have been condoned, but not the meanness ınd deception which you have carried on under my roof or five months. You have disgraced yourself and me y such conduct." Would Alix ever forget those words?

By and by Ranee asked another question. "Did he ɹeak about Captain Lugard?"

"Yes, he has written to him, and he was very angry ɔcause I could not tell him where to direct the letter. ⌈icholas is moving about just now, I think, but I am ʇot sure that he is in London."

"But surely he could not blame you for that?"

"He thought I was not telling him the truth"—in a ʇifled voice. "He has lost all faith in my word. He ɐid that he should ask Dawtie. But after a time he be-

lieved me. He said things could not go on like this, and Nicholas must take me away."

Ranee was silent. She had expected this; and after all Alix's rightful place was with her husband.

"Nicholas will be good to me, I am sure of that," went on Alix. "But to be sent away in disgrace! Oh, Ranee, it is hard to bear. And," in a despairing voice, "what are we to do? Nicholas is poor, and I shall not be of age for another year and a half; and if father will not help us——"

"Dearest Alix," interrupted Ranee, "Mr. Ashton knows all this, and I am sure he will not refuse to help you. Do you suppose he will allow his only child to starve?"

"I should not starve," returned Alix with a wan smile; "but we should be very poor, and all my life I have never been denied anything I wanted. This may be part of my punishment." But Ranee absolutely refused to share this view. Mr. Ashton might be stern and severe, but he was not inhuman.

"He is going to tell Binney and Walton," continued Alix a few minutes later. "He says there shall not be another hour of deception, and that the whole household shall know it before he sleeps."

"I think he is right there."

"He has no mercy on my feelings," went on Alix, taking no notice of this; "he will not allow me to absent myself from meals or shut myself up in my room. 'We will have an end of all these invalid fancies, Alix.' Oh, it was cruel of him to say that! 'Things are to be as usual when visitors come to the house. You will entertain them properly. As long as you remain under my roof, I shall expect you to do your duty.' Ranee, do you

hink that he will make me go to Godstone on Thurs-
ay?"—for that was the day fixed for Mrs. Lugard's
arden-party. But Ranee only shook her head dubi-
usly; she had no opinion to offer. It was quite within
he bounds of possibility that Mr. Ashton would insist
n Alix's accompanying him, unless something unex-
ected intervened, or Nicholas Lugard turned up at the
arth.

Chapter XXIV

"MRS. NICHOLAS LUGARD"

May we all dare to be true,
Nothing can need a lie;
The fault that needs it most
Grows two thereby.
GEORGE HERBERT.

You may change your opinion to-morrow, and so I wish you good even.—*Fortunes of Nigel.*

THE next day was Sunday, and Alix occupied her usual place at the breakfast-table, no doubt thankful that the massive silver urn screened her from her father's view.

At his entrance she had risen nervously, but he passed her chair with a curt "Good morning" that included Ranee, and the meal proceeded almost in silence.

Walton waited on them. It needed no second glance at the old man's face to assure Ranee that Mr. Ashton had kept his word, and that the household had been told. Mrs. Binney's eyes looked as though she had been crying, and as Walton handed the dish to his young mistress his hand shook a little. He and Binney had been at the Garth when Roger Ashton had brought his young bride home, and it seemed a sad and monstrous thing to their faithful hearts that the Squire's daughter should have married secretly.

"I don't hold with hole-and-corner weddings, Mrs. Binney," he had observed the previous evening; "I told

the Squire so. 'Our young lady has been taken in,' I said to him. 'You'll excuse me, Squire, if I am talking too free, but I have no opinion of the Captain. It is a dark horse that Miss Alix is betting on. But perhaps, after all, the ceremony being done in a foreign land may not be binding."

"'You need not trouble your head about that, Walton,' he says to me short and sharp, as is the Squire's way. 'I am making all necessary investigations. I have a friend over there who will carry out all my instructions,' says he. 'But I fear there is no mistake about the business.' Oh, that we should have lived to see our dear young lady wedded in this fashion!"

"Oh, you may well say so!" exclaimed Mrs. Binney, wiping away her tears. "To think of my Miss Alix being married and none of us being near her; and wearing her wedding ring round her neck as they do in those dreadful novels that James reads; and she whom I nursed in her babyhood, and a sweeter-tempered baby as never was." But here Mrs. Binney's feelings were too much for her.

Ranee tried to utter a few remarks during the meal, but Mr. Ashton's answers were so curt that at last she took refuge in silence. As he rose from the table he addressed his daughter.

"The carriage will be round at the usual time, Alix;" for the only place of worship at Marshlands was a dissenting chapel, and the household at the Garth always went to St. Vedast's. When the weather permitted, Alix had been in the habit of walking there with her father. There was a short cut across the fields, which was very pleasant in summer time; and now and then, when Mr. Ashton was in a sociable mood, they would have luncheon

at the Park. Latterly this had become a custom. During the Maxwells' long absence from Godstone they would sometimes spend an hour at the Vicarage, and sometimes Alix would remain for the evening service.

Alix looked up with a frightened glance as her father spoke. "I thought of staying at home," she faltered; "it is so hot."

"St. Vedast's is generally cool," he replied. "There is no reason why you should not attend service as usual;" and Alix did not dare say any more. But in Ranee's opinion she certainly did not look fit for the exertion. It might not be possible to avoid coming in contact with the party from Godstone Park, and she knew that Alix was secretly dreading this.

It may be doubted if any of them enjoyed the service. Sir Heber and his sister occupied the seat immediately before them, and as Damaris passed up the pew she glanced furtively at Alix before she settled herself. But Alix was reading the Thirty-nine Articles upside down.

It was generally Mr. Ashton's custom to remain in his seat after service until the church was nearly empty, but on this occasion he rose at once. Damaris motioned to her brother to do likewise; but he was brushing his hat in the good old English style, and took no notice. And they only reached the porch as the Ashtons drove off.

'Damaris looked after them curiously, but she said nothing then. By and by, as they sat at luncheon, she suggested that they might walk across to the Garth a little later. "The field path has plenty of shade, and a little exercise will do you good, Heber," she observed, "for you are growing fat and lazy." And, as usual, Damaris had her way.

Alix had just handed her father his second cup of tea

Mrs. Lugard and Sir Heber were announced. Alix
l rather white as she advanced to meet them. Da-
greeted her in her usual airy manner.
: is such a lovely afternoon, that we thought we
l pay you a surprise visit. What made you drive off
:h a hurry this morning? There was something I
d to ask you." And then Mr. Ashton gravely placed
r for her. Was it absence of mind, Damaris won-
, that made him forget to shake hands? The next
nt he had turned to Sir Heber.
amaris was afraid that Miss Ashton did not feel
explained Sir Heber, "and she proposed that we
l come over to inquire. It was friendship *versus*
as I told her."
was certainly rather hot for walking," replied Mr.
n, with rather an inscrutable smile. "You must
e me, Maxwell, but you are not giving my daughter
ght name."
Heber regarded him with a puzzled air. "I don't
stand," he returned, perplexed by the solemnity of
iend's manner. "I said 'Miss Ashton,' did I not?"
would have been nearer the mark if you had said
Nicholas Lugard,' and I think Alix will endorse
Then Damaris gave a sudden start and grew sud-
red.
'hat!" exclaimed Sir Heber, scarcely able to be-
is ears. He could not suspect Mr. Ashton of jest-
ut the whole thing was so incredible.
rs. Nicholas Lugard!" he repeated, while Alix
l ready to sink with shame at this public recogni-
"What on earth can you mean, my dear Ashton?"
ou had better ask your sister," returned the Squire
. "She will probably be able to enlighten you."

"I know nothing about it," returned Damaris nervously. Her face was scorching, and she looked terribly scared. "How can you say such a thing, Mr. Ashton? It is not fair. I knew Nick admired our dear Alix—indeed he often told me so—but I never guessed that things had gone as far as that."

Damaris spoke in a tone of injured innocence, but Ranee noticed that she did not meet Mr. Ashton's eyes. But it was evident that neither of the gentlemen believed her. Sir Heber gave her a keen, searching glance, then he turned to Mr. Ashton.

"It is a fact, then?" in a low voice.

"Yes, it is a fact," replied Mr. Ashton drily. "I supposed you were in your stepson's confidence, Mrs. Lugard. Alix told me herself that you took him to the Rue de Malmaison. Pardon me"—as Damaris would have contradicted this—"as this is also an assured fact, there is no need to waste words."

"I am not denying it," replied Damaris rather angrily; "but you have no right to accuse me of conniving at this marriage. It is true, I remember it now, that Nicholas went with me once—no, twice—to Madame Bergère's. The poor fellow begged so hard to accompany me, and I thought there could be no harm, Alix was such a child. But I never dreamt—Nicholas never gave me a hint—of his little scheme. Alix, why don't you speak? You know how little you saw of me just then."

"Yes, I know, but I would rather not say anything more," returned Alix in a low voice. But Damaris, who was growing every minute more excited, turned on her crossly.

"Is it my fault if you have played this trick upon us?

I am very, very angry with Nick, but I think you have treated me badly too. You know I was your chaperon —that in a way Mr. Ashton had left you in my charge— and because I was very busy just then, and could not look after you, you have got me into this trouble." And Damaris was full of indignant grief. "How could I have dreamt of such a thing! Oh, Alix, Alix, who would have imagined you were so deep! And you are actually married!" But poor Alix, overcome by her feelings and her sense of Dawtie's falseness and double-dealing, only hid her face in her hands.

"That will do, Mrs. Lugard," returned Mr. Ashton coldly. "You can leave Alix to me; she knows what I think about the matter. I am not condoning her fault if I say to you that I think Captain Lugard is more to blame. He is older, and a man of the world, and he has more to gain by this marriage. Now I am going to beg Sir Heber to come to the library with me; but before we retire I wish to ask you for your stepson's present address—it is necessary for me to communicate with him at once."

"But I do not know it," she stammered. "I believe he is in London, but I am not sure."

"Are you quite certain of this, Damaris?" observed Sir Heber. "I thought he wrote you a line yesterday from the Grosvenor Hotel."

Damaris gave her brother an unpleasant look. "There was no need for me to mention that to Mr. Ashton," she replied hurriedly, "as Nick talked of going to Staines for a night or two. But of course the careless boy never told me his address."

"Are you sure he did not mention his friend's name, Damaris?" asked her brother gravely. "Remember this

is very important." But Damaris declared that she could not remember the name. It was either Boyd or Lloyd or Floyd; but she had destroyed the letter, and could not recollect. Then Mr. Ashton, with a little shrug, put an end to the unsatisfactory conversation by again suggesting that Sir Heber should accompany him to the library. As he passed Alix, he hesitated a moment.

"I am sure Mrs. Lugard would excuse you if you like to go to your room;" and for the first time there was a fatherly touch in his tone. Perhaps he felt she had borne enough. "I am sure Mrs. Lugard will excuse you." But Damaris rose with a stately little air.

"The visit has been too long already," she remarked curtly. "I shall not wait for you, Heber. Good-bye, Alix, my dear. You and Nicholas must manage your own affairs, for I wash my hands of the whole concern. Nicholas is of age and can answer for himself. *Au revoir*, Ranee; I suppose we shall meet on Thursday." And Damaris swept crisply through the room, quite ignoring Mr. Ashton, who had opened the door for her.

"Good evening, Mrs. Lugard," he said gravely. But Damaris pretended not to hear. Her little, trivial, butterfly nature was strangely ruffled. Her visit had ended disastrously. She had always been afraid of Mr. Ashton, but this afternoon her brother's attitude alarmed her still more. He had not taken her part; he had left her to answer Mr. Ashton's odious questions without coming to her assistance. If Heber chose to resent this affair he might make things very unpleasant for her as well as Nicholas. She must smooth him down and talk him into good-humour, or her Thursday would be spoilt.

"I rather hope Nick won't turn up just now," she said to herself, as she walked on. "Jack Floyd will be sure

o keep him for a day or two, and there are some lively irls at the Lodge." For, strange to say, Damaris had uddenly recovered her memory. She had had no special eason in telling Mr. Ashton that fib, unless it was from desire to annoy him, but she had been ashamed to re-ract it. "I will tear up the letter the moment I get ome," she went on. "And to-morrow I will drive over o the Red House and bring Vera back with me; that will put Heber into a better temper, he seems to like her society. If it was any one else but that dear old stick-in-the-mud, I should be a little afraid. But Heber!" and here Damaris gave a scornful little laugh; for with all her crooked little ways she was very dense, and often made strange blunders. "Dawtie never sees anything that she does not want to see," Alix had once said, and now and then she carried this too far.

As Mrs. Lugard had gone, there was no need for Alix to take refuge in her room, so Ranee coaxed her to lie down on the couch, and sat beside her, trying to distract her thoughts a little. But Alix was too worn out to talk much.

"I am afraid Sir Heber was dreadfully shocked," she had said, and Ranee could not deny it.

"Never mind," she went on presently; "it is far better that he should know. But I never saw any one so taken aback as Mrs. Lugard when your father corrected Sir Heber. Her face was crimson, and she looked ready to run away."

"Dawtie is such a coward."

"Sir Heber will have a bad time of it when he gets back." And then after a little more discussion Ranee fetched a book. "I am not going to let you talk any more, Alix," she said very sensibly. "You have had a

bad night, and you will be all the better for a little nap, so I shall read you to sleep;" and though Alix feebly scouted the idea, it was evidently a relief to her to close her eyes.

Ranee read as monotonously as possible, and before an hour had passed she had the satisfaction of seeing Alix in a sweet sleep. A few minutes later she slipped away and went out into the garden.

It was nearly two hours before Sir Heber left the Garth. Ranee, who thought they were still shut up in the library, was rather surprised to see Mr. Ashton coming towards her from the gate. He had accompanied Sir Heber part of the way back.

"Where is Alix?" was his first question.

"I have been reading her to sleep," was Ranee's answer. "She slept badly last night, and she is very tired. So I came out for some air."

"Shall we go into the orchard?" he returned quietly, and Ranee saw that he was not averse to her society. "Maxwell and I have had a long talk. He is a good fellow; I have the highest opinion of his common-sense and straightforward, practical views. He is very much shocked about all this."

"Oh yes, I am sure of that."

"He is very severe on his sister. He declares that, though she will never own it, she is at the bottom of the mischief."

"I think so too, Mr. Ashton."

"Then we are all of one opinion, though for Maxwell's sake there can be no open quarrel. But you will be glad to hear that he spoke very kindly of Alix. He says she is so young and so easily guided, and that Nicholas Lugard is just the man to get an influence over a girl like

Alix. 'He would morally hypnotise her,' were his words."

"I am so glad he said that."

"But he spoke a good word for him too—Maxwell is never hard on people if he can help it. He owns there is little love between them, and that the fellow has put him to endless trouble and expense; but he declares that Captain Lugard has turned over a new leaf lately, and that he had promised faithfully to give up gambling and betting. 'When I paid his debts, I made him sign a paper to this effect, and I told him then that he should never have another penny of my money if he failed to keep faith with me.' I own I was relieved when Maxwell told me this."

"But he does not like him?"

"No, neither do I; we both object to gentlemanly loafers. He takes some pride in his profession, but he wants ballast. All the same Maxwell assures me that he is not so black as he is painted. He does not deny that he probably made love to Alix for her money, but he thinks it very possible that he has grown to care for her."

"And do you share this opinion?" she asked eagerly. But Mr. Ashton shook his head with a melancholy smile.

"When I look in his face I shall know what to think; until then I will reserve my opinion." And then they walked on a while in silence.

Chapter XXV

ROGER ASHTON'S PAST

My prime of youth is but a frost of cares,
My pearl of joy is but a dish of pain,
My crop of corn is but a field of tares,
And all my goodes is but vain hope of gain.
The day is fled, and yet I saw no sun;
And now I live, and now my life is done.
Last words of CHIDIOCK TICHBOURNE.

A SOLEMN Sabbath stillness pervaded the orchard as hey seated themselves on the bench under the "Seven)ld Sisters." The faint sound of church bells had died ;way, and only the twittering of birds was audible in the ilence.

As they sat there enjoying the coolness, Ranee was onscious of some subtle change in Mr. Ashton's mood. 'erhaps the sympathy of his old friend had softened his ;rim humour, but this evening he seemed no longer shut ıp in impenetrable reserve. There had been a softening ;leam in his eyes as the girl joined him.

"Mr. Ashton, will you let me ask you one question?" sked Ranee timidly. She was very much afraid of her wn voice, but the opportunity was too good to be lost. 'You say Sir Heber spoke kindly of Alix—that was so ıice of him. Perhaps—I almost think this will make you eel differently—that"—dropping her voice more and nore—"that after a time you may bring yourself t orgive her."

Mr. Ashton frowned. "I have said nothing to lead you to believe that, Miss Holt. I was only repeating Maxwell's words."

"Yes, I know, but all the same I could not help hoping that he might have induced you to think more gently of her, poor dear. Alix is so sorry. Oh, you have no idea how she grieves at the thought of your anger. She is almost broken-hearted sometimes. She hoped that when you read her letter——"

"What are you speaking about?" interrupting her abruptly. "I have seen no letter of hers."

"But I brought it to the library myself on Friday," returned Ranee quickly, "when you went out to speak to your bailiff. I put it on the little table beside your chair, and I remember as I did so that it seemed to me as though the man in armour were pointing to it. I know there was nothing else on the table."

"Are you sure?" with a puzzled look. "I remember I did not go in until after dinner that day. The room was rather dark then. I had some papers and pamphlets in my hand, and I put them down on that very table. The letter must be there still."

"And you never saw it? Oh, how glad I am to know this!" And Ranee beamed with pleasure.

"When we go back to the house I will look for it, and then I promise you that it shall be read." Then as he met the girl's radiant eyes Roger Ashton's heart throbbed rather strangely. What a loyal simple nature she had! How stanch and true she was to her friends! He was a lonely, embittered man, but he was by no means old, and it might be he would still warm himself at the fire of life.

More than once he had been conscious of a strong de-

ire to win the friendship and approbation of this young creature. In spite of the difference in their years, and hough she was only a few months older than his own laughter, he had been deeply impressed with her good ense and sincerity. Her enthusiastic views of life and lecided originality at once amused and stimulated him. He was ordinarily a reserved man, but once or twice in iis life he had had strange impulses that had driven him o act in a manner that seemed contrary to his nature, ind to-night as Ranee so sweetly pleaded with him on ehalf of her friend, an overwhelming desire came to him o speak of the past. She thought him hard and unforgiving, but she little knew how sorely he had been tried.

"You think I am severe on Alix," he began slowly, 'but you do not know what I have to fear. She has her nother's nature."

Ranee looked up quickly. There was concentrated pain in Mr. Ashton's voice as he uttered these few words.

"Alix was speaking of her the other day," she observed gently. "She loved her so deeply; she said she was so beautiful."

"Yes, she was very beautiful," he repeated gloomily, 'and never more so than when she lay in her coffin. I suppose Alix told you too that she was not happy?"

Ranee coloured. "She said something of the kind."

"You need not be afraid of hurting my feelings," he returned drily; "every one in all Marshlands knew that my wife was not a happy woman. Miss Holt, you are young, but I should like you to do me justice. When I married I was as much in love as other young men of my age, and I thought I had every prospect of happiness. Do you remember what you called the Garth that

first evening?—'the haunt of ancient peace.' Alas it was no peaceful home to either of us."

"Oh, why not?" Ranee almost whispered the words, —"this dear beautiful house."

"Olive never loved it," he returned bitterly. "Her parents were poor, and they made her marry me. She was like her daughter, timid and young and easily led, and she was very much afraid of her mother. If I had guessed the truth, I would rather have cut off my right hand than have married her; but they taught her how to deceive me, and love made me blind, and no suspicion of the truth came to me until after Alix was born."

"Was she afraid of you, too?"

"Yes, she was never at her ease with me. But there was worse than that behind. The poor child cared for some one else, and I never knew it until too late. Oh, they deceived me well, and they taught her to deceive me, too."

"Oh, Mr. Ashton, how dreadful!"

"You would say so if you knew it all. But I can tell you no more. From the first I had no chance—my wife's heart was closed to me. I think the joylessness and the hopelessness of her life killed her at last, and I was powerless to help her." And as he said this his voice sank into silence.

He would tell no more; he had said enough to vindicate himself, and he felt instinctively that at least one person would do him justice.

The saddest part of the tragedy should never be unveiled by him. No human being, if he could help it, should ever know the danger from which he had saved her; how, tempted in a weak moment by her old lover

—an unprincipled man—Olive had stolen from her home one moonlight night, leaving her sleeping infant in her cradle, to seek the protection of the man she loved. The snare had been laid cleverly for her unwary feet. Olive believed that her husband, who had been summoned to London on business, would not return until the following night, but before she had reached the point where Cyril Brent would be awaiting for her, she came face to face with Roger Ashton. The sudden shock and her terror at his appearance so wrought on her weak constitution that she fell at his feet in a fainting fit, and Roger carried her home.

A nervous illness was the result, and for weeks he never saw his wife unless she were sleeping; but from that day he never spoke to her of what had happened. But a letter from him reached Cyril Brent, which induced him to take an appointment in India.

"If I had found you that night, I believe I should have killed you," he wrote, "but Providence kept us apart. For your own sake I advise you never to come within twenty miles of the Garth. I am a strong man, and I should have no mercy."

Certainly as he read this Cyril Brent felt that England was no safe place for him.

Roger Ashton never reproached his wife, but Olive instinctively shrank from him, for her conscience accused her. She could not love him, although he was the father of her child, for her heart belonged to Cyril.

Roger was wonderfully patient with her, but after a time he gave up all attempts to win her from her sadness; it was utterly hopeless, and so they drifted apart more and more.

On her deathbed she said a word to him as though

she craved his forgiveness. "I have not been a good wife, Roger, and you have been very patient." But before he could answer there was a rush of hæmorrhage and she was gone.

Perhaps it was as well that he had not answered her, for he knew that in his heart he had never forgiven her for that attempt to desert him and his child. And though to his torment he loved her still, the memory of that night was ever between them. And so it was that the words of forgiveness that Olive had craved too late were said beside her coffin. As he kissed the fair forehead, now cold as marble, he whispered that no one should ever know how much he had to forgive. And to this hour Roger Ashton had kept his word. Only this one thing he would say, what all Marshlands knew, that the mistress of the Garth had been an unhappy woman.

Ranee was profoundly affected. In a dim way she guessed something of the hidden tragedy of Roger Ashton's life.

"Oh," she said sadly, "if only Alix had not deceived you too!"

"Ah, you may well say that. Alix has abused my trust cruelly; but we will not speak of that now. If I could see evidence of a real repentance, it might be that I could bring myself to forgive her."

"Indeed, indeed she is truly sorry!" exclaimed Ranee. "Badly as Alix has treated you, she loves you dearly; though her nature is timid, and that makes you think her cold. Oh, Mr. Ashton, if you would only believe me!" Then she saw his face soften.

"I do not doubt you for a moment, and I am sure you believe what you say. But you must forgive me, my

dear child, if I feel that I must judge for myself in this." Then, as Ranee looked rather downcast at this, he took her hand and pressed it kindly.

"I thank you from my heart," he said gently, "you have been goodness itself to me and my poor Alix; and you helped me in my trouble far more than you know. Now it must be getting late, and I will go and hunt for that letter." And then they walked back to the house in silence.

Alix was still sleeping; her overwrought mind and body needed rest. Ranee sat down beside her. What a sweet face it was, she thought, and yet how inexpressibly weary. What a child she looked, in spite of her wedding ring, as she lay there in her white dress, with the soft fair hair a little loosened from the heat. Could the Olive who had made her husband so unhappy have looked more lovely? But even as the thought passed through Ranee's mind she heard Mr. Ashton's footstep, and was surprised that he had already found and read Alix's note. He did not seem conscious of her presence as he stood with folded arms at the foot of the couch, looking down at the sleeping girl.

Was it possible that some resemblance to her mother suddeny struck him, for his face worked with strong emotion, and the stern grey eyes softened into tenderness. Perhaps the sense of being watched woke Alix, for at that moment she opened her eyes. For a moment she thought she was dreaming; then with a little cry she suddenly raised herself, and the next moment she had flung herself on his breast. "Father, forgive,"—only those two words. Then, after an instant's hesitation, his arms closed round her and his lips were pressed to her forehead. Ranee saw and heard no more; in the

ummer gloaming she slipped behind a screen and ffected her escape.

Later that night Roger Ashton sat in his study with worn old Bible that had belonged to his mother on he table beside him. Alix's note lay on the open page. Some words spoken by the Divine Master had haunted his memory, and he had looked them out:

> So likewise shall my Heavenly Father do also unto you, if ye from your hearts forgive not every one his brother their trespasses.

And there was peace that night in Roger Ashton's heart.

Chapter XXVI

A MESSAGE FOR CAPTAIN LUGARD

The flights of the human mind are not from enjoyment to enjoyment, but from hope to hope.—JOHNSON.

Idleness is sweet and sacred.
When you have found a day to be idle, be idle for a day.
LANDOR.

THE day before the Godstone Park garden-party Ranee was sitting alone in the morning-room busy with some work, when the door opened and Vera appeared. Ranee gave a little cry of delight as she jumped up from her seat.

"Oh, you blessed little creature," she exclaimed rapturously, "how glad I am to see you! And I am all alone too."

"I knew that, or I should not have come," returned Vera rather soberly. "Sir Heber saw Alix and Mr. Ashton in the village; they were driving in the direction of Croft Farm—so as Damaris was busy I thought I would run over and have a talk. I have been wanting to get at you so badly, Ray."

Vera's tone was a little worried, and there was a slight pucker of anxiety on her ordinarily smooth brow. But to Ranee's eyes she looked prettier than ever; and indeed in her cool morning dress and shady hat she looked the very embodiment of freshness and girlish grace.

"I have wanted you dreadfully too," sighed Ranee.

"You know I am staying at Godstone," went on Vera. "Damaris drove over on Monday and insisted on taking me back with her. If I had known how things were I would not have consented, but she never said a word about Alix until we were in the carriage. Oh, Ray, I was so shocked, I could not help crying about it. And then Damaris laughed at me."

Ranee's lip curled contemptuously, but she made no remark.

"To think that fair little childish thing could be so deep," went on Vera in a moved voice. "Oh I am so disappointed in her. I could not bear Damaris laughing; it seems so wrong to take such a thing lightly. I confess," hesitating slightly, "that I don't quite understand Damaris. She blames Alix, and says she is a very naughty girl, and that she is very angry with Captain Lugard, and yet the whole thing seems to amuse her. I think she does it out of bravado."

"Very likely."

"And then Sir Heber seems so displeased with her. He scarcely addresses her at meals, and though she pretends not to mind it, I can see that she is secretly uneasy."

"I am afraid you are not enjoying your visit, Vera?"

"No, indeed; I have wished myself at home half-a-dozen times," in a distressed voice. "Sir Heber is so unlike himself, but when Damaris is not there he is as nice as ever. Do you know, Ray, I am afraid they had a serious quarrel yesterday. She would follow him into the library to have it out with him, as she said, because he was so disagreeable; but I am sure she repented it, for when she came back into the drawing-room I could see she had been crying. And this morning she is so

cross with Bear. I was quite sorry for the poor little thing. But, as usual, Gavin came to the rescue."

"Poor dear Vera, you are discovering that your charming friend has her faults."

"Oh, I never said she was perfect," returned Vera quickly. "I don't think Damaris is always kind and considerate to her brother. I feel so sorry for him sometimes when I see how she hurts him; and he is so good to her and Bear. But the fact is, Damaris has a temper, though she tries to prevent people finding it out."

"I discovered that myself long ago."

"But all the same I am very fond of her," went on Vera hastily; "though I can never again be blind to her faults. But there, we had better not talk about it any more. And now I want to know if you are all coming over to the Park to-morrow?"

"No, only your humble servant. My dear Vera, how could you expect Alix to be there? She is very far from well, and then at any moment Captain Lugard may turn up; it would be dreadful for them to meet in that crowd."

"Yes, of course. But, Ray, is it true that Alix and her father are reconciled? Sir Heber told me that he was certain of it; but Damaris insisted that he was playing the part of outraged parent on Sunday. He looked like the Sphinx and Patience on a monument and Lot's wife when she became a pillar of salt all blended together—that is how she described him."

"Mrs. Lugard's wit was in questionable taste," returned Ranee severely. "Yes, I am thankful to say that he has forgiven her. He is so good to her, Vera; it is touching to see them together. She is so grateful——so child-like in her humility; she feels as though she can never do enough to make amends for her fault."

"And are you coming alone then?"

"No, Peter and Sallie will call for me. Peter was here yesterday," and Ranee smiled happily at the remembrance.

Peter had found her alone, and they had had a long satisfying talk together. He had heard the news from Dr. Weston, but Ranee was not a little relieved by the comparative mildness of his judgment on her friend's conduct.

"Miss Ashton—I beg pardon, I mean Mrs. Nicholas Lugard—is one of those weak, amiable people who are easily dominated by unscrupulous persons," he had remarked, and the vials of Peter's wrath had been reserved for Captain Lugard; and he was evidently relieved when he heard of the reconciliation.

"I am glad of that, Ra," he said cordially. "Poor little soul, I expect that she is more sinned against than sinning. And she is very far from strong. She has a feeble constitution; she is the sort of girl who, if she had been crossed in love, might have gone into a decline; and she is lacking in backbone and nerve. I hope," with a frown "that the fellow will be good to her; but from what Weston tells me I have my doubts."

"He really loves her, Peter."

"My dear Ra," and Peter spoke with his old sententitousness, "love is a comprehensive term, and includes all shades and varieties of feelings. In the case of a man like Nicholas Lugard, I can imagine the virgin whiteness a little besmirched; he has proved himself both selfish and unscrupulous."

"Oh, dear, oh dear, and Alix is so sensitive—an unkind word seems to wither her. Well, we must hope for the best."

"Now I must be going, Ra. You were a little brick not to drop a hint of this when I saw you that night; and I am sure you have done your level best for the poor child." And then Peter would have gone, but Ranee detained him.

"One moment, dear; I want to know if Hannah Burke has been told about Alix?"

"Yes. Margaret Weston was at Wayside on Monday, and I saw Miss Burke afterwards."

"And she was very much shocked?"

"I think she was more sorry," returned Peter gravely. "Miss Burke is a large-hearted person, and very lenient in her judgment. 'Poor little thing, one must remember she has no mother,' that is what she said."

"That was lovely of her. Good old Hannah!" and then Peter refused to be kept an instant longer.

Vera could not stay long, because she said Damaris would be expecting her back; and as Ranee saw that she was unwilling to remain and see Alix, she made no attempt to detain her. But she was hardly out of sight, and Ranee was still at the gate, when the phaeton and pair of spirited horses turned the corner. Mr. Ashton was driving.

"Make haste, Alix," he said as he lifted her down; "it is just luncheon-time, and I have an engagement at half-past two;" and Alix limped away quickly. She had still a slight lameness, but her health had certainly improved; and Ranee wondered if it were the drive or her father's company that had made her cheeks so pink during luncheon. She was a little silent and preoccupied, and Ranee saw at once that Mr. Ashton noticed it; but directly they were left alone together, Alix volunteered an explanation.

"Ranee," she said in a quick excited way, "I want to tell you something. I have heard from Nicholas. We drove round by Abbey-Thorpe and called at the Post Office. I read the letter while father did his business at the saddler's. He is really coming to-morrow."

"Oh, Alix, are you sure?"

"Yes; he will not disappoint me again. There, you may read his letter. It is very short—only he was in such a hurry, poor fellow." Then Ranee a little reluctantly took the note.

Captain Lugard wrote a bold, dashing hand.

"My dearest little Alix," it began, "Dawtie's letter has just reached me. It followed me to Teddington and Bracknell, and finally unearthed me at the Métropole. She wants me to put in an appeaance to-morrow. It is rather a nuisance, as I had an engagement to go down to Clieveden with Sowerby and Temple; but I suppose I must cancel it or Dawtie will cut up rough. She says it is a big affair, and she has set her heart on my being there, so I will get Donaldson to bring me over in his motor. He is a decent chap, and Dawtie knows him. He was rather gone on her last time they met. Of course you will be there, sweetheart. It is rather awkward our meeting in a crowd, but Dawtie will manage for us, and I will get a quiet time with you somehow. Don't worry, darling, things will straighten out somehow. I suppose I must have a talk with your father on Friday. I daresay he will make things a bit unpleasant for us at first, but he will come round after a time. So don't spoil your pretty eyes by fretting. If your father behaves decently to us, I know I shall be able to make my little wife happy; and though I don't deserve her, I mean to turn over a new leaf and be a better fellow.—Your loving husband,

"NICHOLAS LUGARD."

"Have you shown this to your father, Alix?" asked Ranee, as she put the note back into the envelope. Somehow the letter had not quite pleased her. There

was plenty of careless good-nature, but no real evidence of earnest purpose. Even at this moment, when his young wife's future hung in the balance, he was amusing himself with his friends, and thinking of his own pleasure, and putting off the inevitable moment of disclosure as long as he could.

"Isn't it a dear letter!" exclaimed Alix, unconscious of her friend's criticism. Her eyes were shining with happy tears. "And he is really coming to-morrow, and I shall not be there. No," more gravely, "I have not told father; I wished to speak to you first. I don't feel I want him to read Nicholas's letter."

"Well, perhaps you are right; but you might tell him that Captain Lugard will be at the Park to-morrow." And as Alix looked rather distressed at this, she continued gently, "You must never keep anything from him again, dear;" and then Alix sighed her acquiescence.

Ranee soon found out that she kept her word, for later on Mr. Ashton joined her in the garden.

"Alix has just been telling me about her letter," he began abruptly. "I guessed it was from Captain Lugard, but I purposely asked no question. I wanted her to come to me of her own accord, and she has done so."

"I am very glad."

"I am glad too. I asked her at once if she would wish to go to Godstone to-morrow; but she said that she would much rather remain with me. She would greatly prefer to see him here. Will you tell Captain Lugard this?"

"I—I do not know him," stammered Ranee; "I have never seen him."

"Ask Sir Heber to introduce him to you, and tell him that you have a message to deliver. Maxwell will man-

ge the rest. You can tell Lugard that he can see Alix lone, and that she is expecting him—that is all you need ay. But perhaps you might add that it would be well or him to come without delay. But if he asks you ques- ions you will know how to answer them."

" I will do my best," returned Ranee, trying to hide her epugnance to the errand. Then Mr. Ashton's gravity elaxed a little.

" I would not trouble you with this if I could help it," ie said kindly; " but Alix is exceedingly nervous about his meeting, and I am anxious for her to get it over as soon as possible. If Nicholas Lugard has any feeling for the girl he has chosen to marry, he will come at once." And though Mr. Ashton said no more, Ranee felt that it might be wise to give Captain Lugard a hint that it would be well for him to put in an appearance at the Garth as early in the afternoon as possible.

The thought of this interview with Nicholas Lugard took off the edge of Ranee's enjoyment; and in spite of he lovely day and her pretty new dress and hat, she was o subdued that Peter asked her in an undertone as they rove up the avenue if anything fresh had happened.

" No," returned Ranee disconsolately; " only Captain ugard is expected this afternoon, and I have a message or him, and I am going to ask Sir Heber to introduce im to me." And then her manner suddenly changed. Oh what a crowd, Peter! and there is the band striking p; and oh, do look, Sallie, how pretty those tents look hrough the trees!" For such is human nature, and espe- ially human nature at twenty, that Ranee forgot her ill- ated message in pleasurable excitement at the animated scene. For the green lawns of Godstone were dotted over with gaily-striped tents, and an excellent band was

discoursing sweet music in a shady nook, and groups of ladies in dainty summer frocks were moving over the turf; and the gay voices and the laughter and the radiant sunshine were so exhilarating to Ranee, who had never been at such a big function before, that even the vision of poor little Alix sitting alone in the morning-room at the Garth died out of her memory.

"Look, there is Vera talking to Sir Heber," she observed, as they walked across the lawn. "Does she not look sweet, Peter?" And indeed Vera, in her Indian muslin, with her dainty breast-knot of Maréchal Niel roses, was attracting unusual attention.

"You shall go to her directly, but we must speak to our hostess first," returned Peter, as he marshalled her in the direction of the marquee.

Damaris, who was looking very charming, was surrounded by a little court. She nodded in rather an off-hand manner to Ranee, as she carelessly shook hands, though she smiled graciously at Peter. "You will find plenty of friends here, Dr. Holt," she observed, and then she turned to another new-comer.

Damaris was in her element. She bore herself with the air of a queen. Her chiffon and lace gown was a perfect dream. As some lady said afterwards, "It must have been a creation of Worth." She carried a beautiful shower bouquet of pink roses. "We are expecting Captain Lugard," Ranee heard her say to a stout old lady beside her. "Yes, I know, Lady Jarvis, Nicholas is a great favourite of yours. He is going to motor down with Major Donaldson——" But Ranee did not wait to hear more. Sir Heber was coming towards them, and Peter had turned aside to greet an acquaintance. She seized her opportunity.

"You are rather late, Miss Ranee; your sister has
en looking for you the last three-quarters of an hour,"
began; but Ranee was in too great a hurry to let him
ish.

"I want you to do something for me, Sir Heber," she
id nervously. "I hear that Captain Lugard is ex-
cted this afternoon. When he comes, will you be good
ough to introduce him to me, as I have rather an im-
rtant message to give him?"

"Is it from his wife?" and Sir Heber's plain features
ore a kind expression.

"Yes, it is from Alix, but Mr. Ashton gave it to me.
e is very anxious that Captain Lugard should call at
e Garth as soon as possible."

"I understand. Mr. Ashton is quite right. We are
pecting Nicholas every minute, and I will bring him
you at once. Now I see Damaris beckoning to me,
I must leave you; you will find your sister and Bear
oking at the tennis." And then Sir Heber hurried
ay.

"What a pity he is not better-looking," thought Ra-
e, as she walked slowly towards the tennis ground. "I
e him; he is a gentleman to the core, and as true as
eel." And then Sallie and Peter overtook her, and
ey went on together.

Chapter XXVII

ANOTHER MESSAGE FOR NICHOLAS LUGARD

Leave her to Heaven,
And to those thorns that in her bosom lodge,
To prick and sting her.

When sorrows come, they come not single spies,
But in battalions.

Hamlet.

BEAR was enthroned in her little carriage, attended as usual by Gavin. Damaris's maternal vanity had vented itself in dressing her child in picturesque fashion, and Bear's exquisite frock of chiffon and lace resembled her mother's; she had even a tiny shower bouquet of pink roses in her small hands. She looked like a child princess, but there was a cloudy and mutinous expression on her lovely little face.

"I don't want those boys to stand there staring at me," she said, pointing imperiously to two little lads in sailor suits. "Tell them to go away, Gavin."

"That would not be polite, Ladybird," returned Gavin; "they are your guests, you know, and you ought to try to make them happy. Would you like me to wheel you closer to the band? Some of the children are dancing over there." But Bear shrugged her shoulders rather discontentedly.

"No," she said, and her lip quivered. "It only makes

ne want to dance too; and I do ache so, Gavin. I want Uncle Heber and my dear Vera." Then Vera, who was talking to her sisters with great animation, came at once to her side.

"I am here, Bear dear. Don't you like watching the tennis?" But the child shook her head.

"No; it makes me giddy. I wish Uncle Heber would ome and talk to me."

"And so he will, darling, directly he is at liberty; but e has all these people to entertain. Here is Ranee; you ave not spoken to her." And then she said in an unertone, "Damaris was very sharp with her this morng, and the poor little thing was quite upset. I must tay with her until Sir Heber comes back. There are the Vestons, and you would like to speak to Margaret." But anee preferred to stay with her sister; she thought Sir Heber would be less likely to miss her. Bear soon forgot er grievances as she listened to their merry talk.

The little group under the acacia soon became the entre of attention. "Who are those girls?" Sallie heard nore than once. And again, "That tall one with the Maréchal Niel roses is quite lovely. I must ask Damaris about her." And Sallie, who had sharp ears, chuckled secretly as she resolved to tell Ranee this. Margaret Weston joined them presently. She had two friends with her, good-looking young Oxford men, whom she ntroduced to the girls. One of them, Walter Long, was connection of the Westons, but this was the first visit) Abbey-Thorpe. He at once singled out Vera, while is companion talked to Ranee. Sir Heber made his apearance a little later. To Ranee's surprise he was alone. s she looked at him inquiringly, he said in a low voice—

"No, he has not come yet. I daresay something has

detained him." Then he addressed Vera. "They are dancing by the marquee," he said. "The children began it, but Damaris suggested that some of the young people should follow their example." Then Walter Long turned rather eagerly to his companion.

"Shall we take a turn, Miss Holt? They have a capital band." And Vera consented very willingly. And as Ranee and Sallie speedily found partners, they were soon dancing on the short, springy turf with much enjoyment, while the elder people sat in the shade and watched them.

The Holt girls all danced well. Not that they had much practice, for neither Ranee nor Sallie had ever been to a ball in their lives, and Vera had only been to one. But dancing was their favourite exercise, and sometimes on winter evenings they would make Peter waltz with them by turns. Now and then, when Margaret Weston had some young cousins staying with her, she would send across to the Red House and beg them to come *en famille*. And then there would be high fun; for even Dr. Weston would be coaxed to take part in the quadrille or lancers.

Sir Heber stood among the spectators; he was not a dancing man. Damaris and her little court of gentlemen were near him. What a regal little person she looked as she stood there! Damaris was in radiant good-humour. Things had gone well with her. She was the best-dressed woman there. No one—not even young Lady Delville, who was a bride and an heiress—had such an exquisite toilette. The weather was lovely, neither too hot nor too cold; and every one was enjoying themselves. Even Heber, in spite of his unpleasant humour, was behaving decently, and playing his part of host less awkwardly than usual.

It was a happy inspiration of hers, Damaris thought, to set the young folk dancing; and the elder people evidently liked to watch them, as they ate their ices. To be sure, Damaris was a trifle bored by the constant questions that were asked about her protégée.

"Dr. Holt's sister, did you say?" observed one lady. "Well, I am surprised; but we have never called at the Red House. And that bright-eyed little girl is another sister?"

"Oh, do let us call on them, mother?" urged a young girl beside them. "Mrs. Lugard will introduce us; and they do look so nice." Then Damaris gave a gay little trickling laugh.

"Vera's a dear, certainly, and I have her a great deal at Godstone; but they don't visit much in Abbey-Thorpe. Dr. Holt is only a beginner, you see." For Damaris was growing a little jealous of the Holts' popularity.

Something in her manner made Mrs. Carstairs draw back. "We will see about it, Camelia," she said a little coldly, and the subject dropped.

Ranee's partner had gone in search of an ice, while she sat fanning herself under a tree. The next moment Vera joined her. Ranee accosted her joyously.

"What a good time we are having! I have never danced on the grass before. It was delicious—a little tiring, as Mr. Hetherington said, but I just loved it."

"Yes, it was very nice. But the band has stopped playing, and I don't think there will be any more dancing. Is it not strange that Captain Lugard has not turned up? But, as Damaris says, he is generally two or three hours late."

"He seems rather an erratic person. Do you know what has become of Sir Heber, Vera?"

"He was here ten minutes ago, talking to me; but Gavin brought him a message from Dr. Weston, and he went at once to the house."

"Dear me," returned Ranee rather anxiously, "I am afraid there is some one ill; for while we were dancing I saw Gavin speak to Dr. Weston and Peter; and they both hurried off at once."

"Oh, I hope it is not Bear!" exclaimed Vera; "she has been very fractious and complaining all day. Damaris was so cross with her, because the poor little thing did not want to be dressed, as her head ached. I think I must go and see if there is anything I can do."

"I will go with you," returned Ranee. As they ran down the slope, they came face to face with Sir Heber. He looked very pale.

"Where is Damaris?" he asked; "I want to speak to her." His manner was so strange and abrupt that the girls were frightened.

"Oh, Sir Heber, what is it?" exclaimed Vera in a troubled tone. "Is Bear ill—may I go to her?" But he shook his head.

"Bear is all right. But I want Damaris, and no one knows where she is."

"She is in that little tent," returned Vera; "would you like me to bring her to you?" Then he gave her a grateful look.

"What is it?" asked Ranee in a low voice, as Vera hurried off on her errand. "I see by your face that something has happened."

"There has been a motor accident," he returned quickly. "Nicholas Lugard is hurt, and Major Donaldson's arm is broken. They sent for Dr. Weston and your brother, and Dr. Ferguson is there too."

"And they have brought them here?"

"Yes, it was the only thing to do. I told Gavin to stop the band, for"—speaking with difficulty—"Ferguson told me just now that Nicholas will never recover consciousness again."

"Do you mean that he will die?" in a tone of horror.

"I mean that he is dead," in the same suppressed voice. "It was all over before they brought him here. They say it was instantaneous; but I know no particulars. Weston is to break it to Damaris. I must take her into the house, and Gavin will get rid of the people."

He stopped speaking as Vera crossed the little lawn. Damaris was with her; they heard her hard, flippant little laugh as she tripped towards them.

"Well, most high, grave, and potent seignior," she began mockingly, as she saw her brother's grave face, "what mysteries are you and the Holt girls concocting together? Urgent business indeed! I suppose that provoking child is in her tantrums again. But you must not keep me an instant, Heber; Lady Delville is just going."

"Damaris, my dear," he said very gently, "I have bad news for you. There has been an accident to Donaldson's motor, and Nicholas has been hurt." Then Damaris changed colour and looked at her brother apprehensively.

"My poor old Nick! But he is not badly hurt, Heber?"

"We will ask Dr. Weston that," he returned evasively, as he took her arm and turned her in the direction of the house. "Donaldson's arm is broken, and Dr. Holt is setting it. They took the chauffeur to the Plough; he is only bruised, they say."

Sir Heber talked on nervously, for he was anxious to avert any direct questions; but the two girls heard no more. As they entered the great hall, they saw Dr. Weston come out of the library and take Damaris's hand; then the door closed on them.

Ranee, who felt a little dazed and giddy, sat down on the oak settle. A few sentences had put Vera in possession of the truth. The sudden transition from mirth to tragedy was almost overwhelming.

"It is impossible—it cannot be true," Vera murmured more than once. Then, in a pitying voice, "Oh, Ray, what will they do about Alix?" Then Ranee gave a quick shudder. That was what she had been saying to herself over and over again—"Alix, my poor Alix, how will she bear this!"

"Don't, Vera, one cannot talk about it. Peter must tell us what to do. I shall remain here till he comes. Oh, the people are going," as the sound of carriage wheels was audible in the avenue.

And then Sallie came in search of them. She looked terribly scared.

"Oh, Vera, do you know what they are saying?" she began, but Ranee silenced her.

"Hush, Sallie, it only makes things worse to talk. We are waiting for Peter; he is setting Major Donaldson's arm. Damaris is in the library with Sir Heber and Dr. Weston." As she spoke the library bell rang, and they heard Sir Heber tell Collins that Mrs. Bolter, the housekeeper, was to come at once; and before the door closed again they could hear Damaris's voice raised in shrill, discordant laughter.

"Oh, poor Dawtie," sighed Vera, "she is so excitable." And then to their intense relief Peter came down

he staircase. His boyish face looked very grave, but he held out his hand to Ranee with a slight smile.

"I knew you would be waiting for me, Ra. Yes, dear," answering her wistful look, "I will take you to her at once. Dr. Weston says we are to use his carriage. Sallie, you had better stay with Vera until I come back. I expect Margaret Weston will come to you. Now, Ra."

Ranee slipped a cold little hand into Peter's as they drove off. "Are you going to tell her?" she whispered.

"There is no one else; Dr. Weston cannot leave, and Ferguson has been called away." Peter spoke with the air of a man who knows he has a painful task before him, and is nerving himself for the duty.

"How did it happen?" she asked presently; but he shook his head.

"No one quite knows. It is hinted the chauffeur had been taking a little too much. It was in that narrow lane —Gunter's Lane. There was a heavy brewer's dray as they turned the corner, and he ran the motor into the ditch. Anyhow it upset, and they were all thrown out, and poor Lugard got caught by the wheel. There, we will not talk about it," as Ranee grew rather white.

The next minute they came in sight of the Garth, and there was Mr. Ashton walking down the road; Peter at once stopped the carriage and jumped out. Ranee followed more slowly; but she did not attempt to join them until Peter beckoned to her, and then they all went towards the house together.

Mr. Ashton did not speak—he looked rather shaken; but as they entered the hall Alix came down the corridor towards them. For the moment she did not see either Peter or Ranee—she was looking at her father

"Oh," she said in a tired voice, "Nicholas has not come, and I am afraid Ranee has never given him the message." She was half-crying as she spoke, for the long waiting had tried her nerves. Then Mr. Ashton put his arm round her.

"Come with me, darling," he said in a low voice; "Dr. Holt wants to speak to you, and your friend Ranee is with him." Then they saw her start a little as though their grave faces alarmed her.

Ranee crept into a corner; there was nothing for her to do, and she was still a little giddy. She heard Peter speaking gently and quietly, as though to a child.

"Something has happened," he said, "to prevent Ranee giving that message. He was sorry to say there had been an accident to Major Donaldson's motor, and both he and Captain Lugard had been hurt." He waited a moment, as Alix gazed at him with frightened eyes, and then went on: "He was grieved to say that Captain Lugard was very badly hurt."

Alix gave a quick gasp. "Then I must go to him. Father, do you hear that Nicholas is hurt? Will you order the carriage and take me to him at once?"

"My poor darling," returned Mr. Ashton mournfully, "you must not go to him yet." But she was too excited to hear him.

"Nicholas is my husband," she said with dignity. "A wife must go to her husband, must she not, Dr. Holt?" And then Ranee heard Peter's quiet level tones answering her.

"Mr. Ashton was right," he said; "it would be useless for her to go to him now. Her husband was unconscious, and he very much feared that things were worse than she imagined. She must be brave, and try to bear

what they had to tell her." But it seemed as though Alix could not or would not understand; she looked at Peter with reproachful, miserable eyes.

"It is not kind of you to keep me away from him," she said; "you ought to know better, Dr. Holt. If he is so badly hurt there is all the more reason for me to go to him. Father," her voice breaking into entreaty, "you will be good to me and take me to my dear Nicholas." Then Mr. Ashton took the little hand stretched out to him so beseechingly and kissed it.

"I will be as good to you as I know how to be," he returned gently; "for, my poor child, my little Alix, you have only your father now;" and then she understood.

* * * * * * * * *

He had carried her up to her room like a little child; but as he would have laid her on her bed she clung to his neck with all her feeble force.

"Father, you forgave me," she sobbed, "but God has punished me for my disobedience;" and then she could say no more.

It was some time before Peter came downstairs. He looked fagged and tired. "She is calmer now; her father and Mrs. Binney are still with her. You may go up to her now, Ra, for Mr. Ashton is going back with me to Godstone; but be as quiet as you can, she is not fit for talk."

"Did she faint, Peter?"

"No, my dear, she was only stunned and dazed, and then she got excited; but she is better now. Mrs. Binney is a good creature, but she is not judicious; she is too emotional for a nurse. I shall recommend Mr. Ashton to send for Miss Burke." Then, as Ranee looked at

him rather dubiously, he said kindly but firmly, "I know you would do your best for the poor little thing; but you are young, Ra, and you have not had Hannah Burke's experience. She will be a comfort to you both; she is strong and gentle, and she will know how to deal with that poor child;" and then Ranee said no more.

Chapter XXVIII

"THERE IS ALWAYS TIME TO SAY 'OUR FATHER'"

The shadow of human life is traced upon a golden ground of eternal hope.—GEORGE S. HILLARD.

We'll trust the wave, and Him to save,
Beneath whose feet as marble lay
The rolling deep;
For He can keep
Our souls in that dim Far-away.

ANON.

RANEE often owned to herself during the days that followed that disastrous Thursday that Peter had done a wise thing in sending Hannah Burke to the Garth. From the moment of her arrival her quiet tact and sympathy had a calming influence on Alix; the mingled firmness and gentleness with which she treated her, the tender patience with her passionate despondency, were healing and salutary to the poor child, who was half-stunned by the sudden shock. When the girl-widow went to Godstone to take a last look at her husband's dead face, it was Hannah who went with her, and who comforted her.

"And indeed, Ranee my dear," she observed afterwards, her quiet voice thrilling with deep emotion, "my heart just ached for her; for the poor fellow looked as though he were sleeping, and not a line or a scratch on his bonnie face; and a grand-looking man he must have

been in life. And to hear her calling him her dear Nicholas, and laying her cheek against his hand, and telling him how dearly she loved him—well, it was just heart-breaking. And to think, poor lamb, that she never had him to herself for a single hour, that they parted as soon as the wedding-ring was on."

"Do you know, that is Mr. Ashton's great comfort," returned Ranee seriously. "We were talking about Alix last night. He said that she was so young, and had seen so little of Nicholas Lugard, and that in his opinion her attachment to him was more a romantic infatuation than a lasting affection, and that he quite hoped that in time she would get over her trouble." But to Ranee's surprise Hannah did not wholly share this opinion.

"It has gone deeper than he thinks," she returned quickly. "Alix is young in years, but she is like that climbing convolvulus yonder. She is very tenacious in her attachments; a strong hand would no doubt pull down all those clinging shoots and suckers, but I doubt the plant would suffer terribly, and Alix is like that."

"But, Hannah, as Mr. Ashton says, Alix was so little with Captain Lugard. She really was so ignorant of his true character." Then Hannah shook her head.

"I doubt if time has much to do with it, Ranee; when love means to be master he takes his own way and his own path. There are widows and widows, and Alix won't easily forget her first lover, for all her father thinks her just a child;" And Hannah's firm lips wore a sad little smile, at which Ranee marvelled.

"You know Mr. Ashton does not want her to go to the funeral," she said presently. "Vera was here just now. She told me that Mrs. Lugard had refused to go, so Alix would be the only lady."

"That will not matter," replied Hannah. "I spoke to Mr. Ashton myself this morning, and told him that Alix was determined to go, and that Dr. Holt thought that it would not be wise to cross her, and then he gave in."

"You will be with her, Hannah. I—I have rather a horror of funerals." Then the older woman looked at her very kindly.

"My dear, there is no need for you or Vera to be there. If Mrs. Lugard were less excitable and undisciplined, she ought to have been there beside Alix; but there is no good forcing people to act contrary to their nature, and she is better staying quietly at home. I am sorry for Vera, for I think her day's work is a hard one just now." And Hannah Burke was right in this surmise.

Sir Heber had begged Vera to remain with his sister for the present, and Peter had assented to this. And Vera had been too kind-hearted to refuse, but her task was not an easy one.

Damaris's light, volatile nature had been touched at last, and her nerves had suffered from the unexpected shock. If she had really loved any one it had been Nicholas. From the first there had been a bond of union between them. They had the same tastes and pleasures; they had each taken life lightly in butterfly fashion. Nicholas had occupied the position of brother to her; he had alternately petted and quarrelled with her; and Damaris had not scrupled to make demands on her brother's purse when Nicholas was in any debt or trouble. Damaris knew that if she had not been wire-puller Nicholas could never have brought about that marriage with Alix. She had manœuvred and connived and laid her little mines with subtle cunning and saga-

city and most consummate cleverness, but she had made one proviso: Nicholas was not to tell her when things were settled. She would know no details of time or place; no power on earth would have induced her to be present at the marriage.

"Remember, I know nothing, Nick. Heber will not be able to blame me when it all comes out," she had said to him the evening before the wedding. And then, carelessly arranging her lace, "So you will not be able to drive with me to-morrow afternoon?"

"Well, you see I have another engagement," he said, with a laugh which was full of meaning to Damaris's ear.

"Oh, very well," she had returned good-humouredly; but her colour rose a little. "Bear and I will go alone." And then he had laughed again and pinched her ear and called her a clever little conspirator; but she pretended not to hear, and made an excuse to leave him.

And the next day, when he brought Alix and placed her under her stepmother's wing, Damaris had kept up the same little fiction, and made believe that they were just amusing themselves with their old flirtation. "Good-bye, Nick," she had said lightly, "I daresay we should see you soon at Godstone." And that was her last sight of Nicholas Lugard's handsome face, for nothing would induce her to see him in his coffin.

In Vera's and Ranee's opinion Alix showed far more womanliness in her firm determination to follow her husband to his last resting-place. The public recognition of her rights seemed to give her slight girlish figure new dignity as she stood beside her father. She gave no one any trouble, and a sweet expression came into her small, worn face as she listened to the solemn and won-

derful words: "In the midst of life we are in death: of whom may we seek succour, but of thee, O Lord, who for our sins art justly displeased?" And again, "We give thee hearty thanks, for that it hath pleased thee to deliver this our brother out of the miseries of this sinful world."

"Ranee," observed Alix, in her tired young voice, later in the evening, as her friend was sitting silently beside her, looking out into the sunset and thinking of many things, "father has been talking to me. He has been so dear and kind to me. He is not at all sure that God has sent the trouble as a punishment for my disobedience. He thinks it may be meant as a lesson—that trials are sent to prove and help us."

"Yes, surely, dear Alix."

"And then Hannah was so beautifully comforting. You know," her lip trembling, "that though father is so good to me, and I love him better every day, I never can bring myself to talk to him about my dear Nicholas"—and here the tears fell fast.

"But why not, dearest?"

"It will be difficult to make you understand, but Hannah knows. Father never will believe—he does not want to believe—that I loved Nicholas with my whole heart. But I did, Ranee, and I shall never, never love any one again."

"Life is very long, Alix."

"Do you think I do not know that?" returned the weeping girl, "and for me life is over. Oh, don't look so startled, Ranee; I know I am not twenty, and I must live as many years as God chooses, but the spring and the gladness of life are gone."

"Oh no, no, you must not say that."

"Dear Ray, why should I not say it if it be true? But I have not told you yet how Hannah comforted me. I was speaking to her about Nicholas one night. The dreadful accident haunted me. I could not sleep for the horror of it. I seemed to see it all, and his dear head in the dust, when that horrible wheel——" but here Alix's hand went up to her throat as though she were choking.

"Darling, why do you talk of it?" But Alix recovered herself.

"It was all so terribly real; and I called out to Hannah and woke her, because I could not bear it alone; and she hushed me in her arms as though I were a baby."

"'God was cruel to take Nicholas like that,' I said to her. 'He gave him no time to repent or be sorry.' But she would not let me finish. And then she kissed me in such a pitying way, and told me that our Father was never cruel to His children, and that He only sent them pain to do them good.

"'But Nicholas,' I cried, almost beside myself, 'he had no time even for a prayer.'

"'There is always time to say "Our Father," she replied in such a solemn way. 'My dear, I have thought much about these things when I have walked alone in the churchyard on Sunday afternoons. There was many a one lying there who was hurried to his death; and it seemed to me then, as it seems now, that if the heart cries out very strongly to the Father, He would not refuse to hear. "Help, Lord!" just these two words, would not take long to say.'"

"Yes, I understand. Go on, Alix," for the girl paused here.

"I cannot quite remember all she said now, but it all

seemed so comforting that I could not help believing it. She said that perhaps Nicholas had not been wise and had refused to learn his life's lesson; and that a sharp remedy was needed, and that the Father knew he would learn better elsewhere. 'There are so many evil spirits round a young man,' she went on, 'their name is legion, and here he does not always get a fair chance. Oh, I have thought it all out. One cannot reason about it, and yet it is all so simple. There is the Father's love and our Lord's atonement; and if the children are disobedient and will not learn, there is the dark room to pass through, and the angels on the other side to teach them.' Oh, Ranee, was it not beautiful?"

"Yes, it was beautiful and very comforting," Ranee answered; but she spoke rather soberly. For how could she know if this were true? And the first time she found herself alone with Margaret Weston she repeated Hannah Burke's words. Margaret was not imaginative, but she was very tolerant and clear-sighted, and thought deeply on these subjects. She called herself an old-fashioned Churchwoman, who belonged to the school of Hooker and Jeremy Taylor; but in reality she was a little broad in her views, and thought that common-sense had a great deal to do with religion. Ranee was half-afraid that she would be shocked by Hannah's visionary ideas; but to her surprise Margaret seemed touched, and her strong-featured, sensible face softened perceptibly.

"It is a very simple and childlike creed," she said thoughtfully, "and I think it strikes me more forcibly just now because I have been reading so much about the Calvinists lately. What a hideous travesty of religion Calvin seemed to inculcate in his followers! They make

the all-merciful Creator of men and angels a sort of monster fetich or Juggernaut. Beside such remorseless doctrine Hannah Burke's creed seems like a sudden streak of sunshine in the murky darkness. It is the doctrine of Eternal Hope. Well, there are many modern thinkers who believe that."

"But is it true?" persisted Ranee. But Margaret hesitated as though it were not easy to answer.

"My dear Ray, there is so little told us, except that God is Love, and we must just hold to that. We all know that to live well is to die well; and when one misses the way, and the light goes out suddenly——"

"Yes, yes—what then, Margaret?"

"Dear Ranee, only the All-Wise can tell us that; and for some good purpose this matter is hidden from our eyes. There was the dying thief, but no one else in Holy Writ." And then Margaret took down a little well-worn book and opened it, and read a brief passage. "Listen to this, Ray: 'One sinner is converted at the hour of death, that we may hope; and but one, that we may fear.' Well," as Margaret closed the book again, and Ranee's eyes were large and wistful, "my dear, Hannah may be right, and to hope is better than to despair, and the rest is with our Father"—and here Margaret's voice grew low and reverent—"our Father, who doeth all things well;" and then Dr. Weston's entrance put a stop to the conversation.

During Vera's visit to Godstone Park the sisters saw each other almost daily. While Hannah Burke remained at the Garth, Ranee found little to occupy her, and it soon became a habit to stroll across the fields and spend an hour or two with Vera. Trouble had not made Damaris unselfish, and her demands on Vera's time and patience

re both unreasonable and exacting. She refused to upy herself, or to be left alone for an hour. Happily had many friends, who took her out driving and d to cheer her, and then Vera would have a little ce.

" It is her restlessness that is so hard to bear," Vera d once. " Dr. Weston told Sir Heber that her nerves re a little unhinged, and that later on a change would good for her. I don't believe she can help it, poor ır," continued Vera; " but it is such a pity that her ld should not be more to her. During the last week e can hardly endure to have her in the room."

" She never has cared much for Bear," returned Ra-e. But Vera, who always made the best of her friends, ıuld not allow this.

" It is her nerves," she observed seriously; " and Bear certainly a little spoilt. Sir Heber was talking to me t night, Ray. Damaris had gone upstairs to see her essmaker, and he found me alone. He was full of ıns for the autumn. The Vivians are going to Italy in tober. They will winter in Rome. They are new ends, but Mrs. Vivian is rather nice, though, as Sir eber says, she is quite a society woman. Damaris likes em both immensely, and he wants her to go with them, d leave Bear at Godstone."

" I expect he will be thankful to get rid of her." But ra refused to endorse that.

" He is doing it solely for her good," she returned in ite a hurt voice. " Ray, you have no idea how kind d patient he is with her. He was very angry with her ıen he first heard of Alix's marriage. He even told r that he did not intend her to live any longer at God-ıne Park; that she was no comfort to him, and he

preferred to be alone. He should allow her a proper maintenance and take a house for her wherever she wished to live. And he meant it too. I never saw Damaris so frightened."

"Do you think he still means to do it, Vera?"

"I cannot tell you that, for of course there has been nothing said lately. But something in his manner gives me the impression that he does not intend Damaris to remain mistress of the house. Oh, I do not wonder at it, Ray. She is so terribly extravagant, and she never studies his wishes in the least. I have heard him remind her of some little thing that he wants done again and again, but she never does it. Bear is the great difficulty. Sir Heber is so devoted to the child, and he would hate to give her up to her mother. One cannot wonder at that. Damaris is so injudicious and uncertain. One moment she spoils Bear, and the next she is scolding her for doing the very things that she encouraged her to do. I felt this so strongly that I begged Sir Heber to keep her."

"Well, Vera?" for she hesitated here.

"He told me that nothing would please him more; that it would be a sore grief to him to part with the child, but that he could not see his way.

"'Damaris is her mother,' he observed. 'Under other circumstances, if there were any good, kind-hearted woman who would assume the responsibility; but with only Gavin and me to look after her——' and here he looked a little uncomfortable, and broke off abruptly."

"What a pity," returned Ranee. "I expect you were shy, Vera, and did not help him properly——" But Ranee did not finish her sentence, for at that moment they saw Sir Heber coming across the tennis lawn towards

them. His plain, homely features lighted up with pleasure as he greeted Ranee and sat down beside them.

"I am glad you have your sister this afternoon," he said, addressing Vera. "I could hear your voices from the rosery. Look, I have cut you some of your favourite La France roses," and he laid the lovely spray on Vera's lap. She thanked him very simply, but her colour was a little heightened.

It was at that moment that a sudden thought sprang into Ranee's mind. Vera's little shy air of satisfaction as she took the flowers, and the quiet pleasure in Sir Heber's eyes as he looked at her, were all at once pregnant with meaning.

Could it be possible that he was falling in love with Vera? Would it not be another version of Beauty and the Beast? Not that Sir Heber was absolutely ugly, but he was so ordinary-looking, so insignificant—"a short dark man," whom Peter had once taken for the butler. To be sure he had nice, honest eyes and a kind expression; but what a contrast to their pretty, graceful Vera, with her sweet girlish bloom and her lovely eyes! But even as these thoughts passed through Ranee's active brain she saw the flush deepen on Vera's face.

"They are so beautiful, and you have cut the best for me," she said softly.

"It is only the best that is good enough," he returned lightly. The words were half-jesting, but there was a sudden glow in Sir Heber's eyes as he spoke.

Ranee gave a little involuntary sigh as she rose to her feet; for it was growing late, and the shadow of the possible future was mingling with the sunset, and "the thoughts of youth are long, long thoughts," and she felt a little afraid.

Chapter XXIX

"THIS IS PURE CUSSEDNESS"

I have ever remarked that when others called thee girlish and wilful, there lay under that external semblance of youthful and self-willed folly deep feeling and stronge sense.—*Kenilworth.*

I want a word of seasonable advice, and can be thankful for it. —*Quentin Durward.*

HANNAH BURKE remained at the Garth for about a fortnight; then she was obliged to return home. Alix was very unwilling to part with her, but Hannah was a busy woman and there were others who needed her sorely.

Ranee looked a little wistful when she bade her good-bye. There would be no chance of her going back to the Red House for a long time, she knew. Under the present circumstances it would be absolutely impossible to leave Alix, who was now wholly dependent on her for companionship.

During Peter's last visit there had been some talk on this very subject between him and Mr. Ashton; and the latter had expressed an earnest desire that Dr. Holt would allow his sister to remain at the Garth. Peter had been much gratified by the way in which Mr. Ashton had spoken of Ranee. "I have reason to be deeply grateful to her," he had said with evident feeling; "she has been a good friend to us both. With the exception of Miss Burke, I know no one I could trust so im-

plicitly." And Peter had felt this to be high praise from a man like Mr. Ashton. The Squire then went on, expressing a hope that Ranee's visit to the Garth would be indefinitely prolonged. "We will do all we can to make her feel herself at home," he said; and then, with a slight trace of hesitation in his manner, he had hinted at some remuneration for her services. "If she remains as Alix's friend and companion, I should wish to make her a suitable allowance." And then he mentioned a sum that made Peter open his eyes; but he kept his thoughts to himself, and after a few suitable words of thanks he promised to speak to his sister.

"You are a lucky little girl, Ra," he said to her a few days after Hannah Burke's departure. "Mr. Ashton is a rich man, and can well afford what he offers; and after all you are doing him a service." But to his surprise Ranee seemed averse to the idea.

"It does spoil things so," she said in a vexed voice. "I thought I was just a visitor, and that I could leave at any moment if I liked. But if Mr. Ashton pays me a salary I shall feel myself obliged to remain. And I don't want to live anywhere but at the Red House with you and Vera and Sallie;" for Ranee had her moments of homesickness, and this was one of them. But, strange to say, Peter was not quite as sympathetic as usual.

"What a baby you are, Ra," he said, with a short laugh. "Why, you are in the lap of luxury here, you little goose, and you see one or other of us once or twice a week. Why, you must be as blind as a bat if you don't see how much it is for your advantage to stay here. Not that I don't want you"—as Ranee looked at him reproachfully—"but I think it is my duty to point all this out to you."

"Oh, I know you mean to be kind, Peter; and of course I quite see that I cannot leave poor Alix yet. I shall probably have to stay here all the winter. It is not that I mind so much, for they are both so good to me, but I don't like the idea of an allowance. It does spoil things—it does really." Then Peter laughed again, but this time rather impatiently.

"Look here, little 'un, this is pure cussedness and pride on your part. But if you had heard the way Mr. Ashton put it, your self-respect would not have been injured; he seemed to think he had no right to ask you to sacrifice your time and home without making some sort of return. He said his daughter had always received a dress allowance, and he thought you ought to have one too. Upon my word, Ra, he was treating you more like his own child than a paid companion."

"Oh, do you think so, Peter?" in a relieved voice. "But you know I have some money of my own, though most of it does certainly go to the house expenses; and if you think——" But here, to her disappointment, Peter jumped up and said he must be going.

"My dear child, I have no time to discuss all this; I have to go over to Godstone now. Why don't you think it out with Vera, she is a very practical little lady; and, after all, it is your affair, not mine, Ra. Shall I tell her that you want to have a talk with her?" And Peter was evidently in such a hurry that Ranee was obliged to let him go, after sending Vera a message to meet her the next morning in the three-acre field, which was just halfway between the Garth and Godstone Park, and which was a favourite trysting-place for the sisters.

Vera was punctual to her appointment, and they seated themselves on a log in a shady corner of the field,

here a mild-eyed Guernsey cow was their only lis-
ner; but they did not at once begin the vexed subject,
r Vera had her own little budget of news to unfold.
"Oh, I was so glad when Peter told me you wanted
e this morning," she began eagerly; "I was just dying
tell you all about our plans. It is quite settled that
amaris is to go to Italy with the Vivians. She will be
vay the whole winter and part of the spring. And she
ants me to look after Bear."
"My dear Vera, what can you mean?" asked Ranee
an astonished voice. "How can you possibly stay at
odstone Park when Mrs. Lugard is away?" Then Vera
)loured quite indignantly.
"My dear Ray, what a strange thing to say. No one
ver dreamt of my remaining at the Park. Damaris
ants me to have Bear at the Red House; she says she
ill be so happy with me, and that Peter can watch over
:r health. And do you know that Sir Heber approved
f the plan—in fact, he looked quite pleased; and he said
avin could take her out every fine day, as he does now."
"Well, it is not a bad idea," returned Ranee. "What
) you think about it yourself, Vera?"
"Oh, I should dearly love to have her," replied Vera,
ithout a moment's hesitation; "and I think, with a lit-
e management, I could make her very comfortable. If
)u and Sallie do not mind, I would put Bear and Nurse
ito your room; it is warmer than the one upstairs, and
e might make the top room cosy for you and Sallie."
"You need not trouble your head about me," returned
anee a little sadly; but Vera seemed quite aware of
iis.
"I knew you were not likely to be much at home this
inter," she said composedly, "or I would never have

proposed turning you out of your room, Ranee; and I know Sallie will not mind. We shall have to get another bedstead, some curtains, and a blanket or two; but I shall do it very cheaply, and Damaris told me privately that Sir Heber would pay handsomely for Bear."

"Have you spoken to Peter yet?"

"Certainly not; there has been no opportunity—we were not alone for an instant yesterday. I thought I would rather talk it over with you, and then we would go over to the Red House one afternoon and have it out with Peter and Sallie."

"Oh dear, how delightful that will be!" sighed Ranee; "I have not been home for over a month."

"Well, we will have a nice little outing together," returned Vera, whose sisterly tact was seldom at fault, and who was quite aware that Ranee was pining for a few hours at the Red House. "We may as well settle it now. Thursday will suit me best, because Damaris is going to have luncheon at the Vivians'. Oh, I quite forgot to tell you, Ranee, that after all she will probably go to Cromer next month for three or four weeks, and in that case I shall go home in another fortnight."

"Then I shall not see so much of you," returned Ranee in a regretful tone; "these morning walks have been so delightful."

"I shall be glad to be at home again for some reasons," observed Vera, "and I know Sallie wants me"—but Vera's tone was somewhat dubious—"and of course at times I have found Damaris very trying. Dr. Weston is anxious to get her away; he thinks she will control herself better among strangers. And is it not odd, Ranee, she seems to have taken a dislike to the house? She will never enter the room where they carried poor

Captain Lugard, or even pass the door if she can help it. And she has had a bed put up for her maid in her dressing-room; I believe she always sleeps with her door open."

At another time Ranee would have been interested in these details, but now she was anxious to bring her own affairs on the tapis.

"Never mind about Damaris just now," she said impatiently, "let us settle about Thursday. We might go quite early, Vera, and spend a long day at the Red House."

"Yes, that will be the best, and then we shall have time to arrange about the rooms. Oh dear, now I come to think about it, it is Peter's day at Slocombe, and he generally has luncheon over there. Do you think that matters, Ray? We shall be so busy, you see."

Ranee considered a moment.

"It is a pity, of course; but he will be in by tea-time—he is always rather earlier than usual on his Slocombe day—so there will be plenty of time to talk over things." And then, when this weighty matter was settled, Ranee began her story.

Vera was very much impressed.

"I think it is so nice of Mr. Ashton," she said more than once; "it is just what I expected he would do. And as for spoiling things, well, I agree with Peter that you are a nonsensical goose." But this very plain speaking rather offended Ranee, who had not quite got rid of what Peter called her "cussedness."

"I am not sure you would like it yourself, Vera," she observed with dignity. "What would you say if Sir Heber were to offer you an allowance?" Then Vera stared at her, and broke into a merry laugh.

"Ray, how can you be so ridiculous! As though that would not be quite different. Sir Heber is a younger man, and Damaris is not his daughter. Besides, he will make a proper allowance for Bear's maintenance—though I daresay he and Peter will settle it between them—and do you suppose we shall make any objection?" Then Ranee shifted uneasily in her seat.

"I suppose I shall have to give in," she said at last, "and I wish I could reconcile myself more to the idea. I think I am proud, for I never will let Alix give me things if I can help it. Of course I know I ought to dress better; and if you think it will be a help to Peter?"

"My dear child, of course it will be a help to him, and to Sallie too. Why, if you are drawing a good salary, we might let Sallie have that course of lessons at once. There is that Fund, you know, and it does seem such a pity for her to be wasting her time."

"Oh, Vera, how sensible you are. I never thought of that. I have been a selfish little pig"—for Ranee loved to deal in strong expressions—"I have only thought of myself, and wallowing in luxury and good living, and all the time poor little Sallie——" but Vera's musical little laugh interrupted her.

"You are not a bit selfish, Ray, but I won't say that you are not proud. Do you recollect what old nurse used to say when we were mites in the nursery? 'Miss Baby Ray is as 'aughty and proud as a little princess, but then she is so coaxing and loving the next minute.' And so you are, dear. It was a kiss and a blow. And once I remember you scratched my face, and then cuddled me for an hour afterwards because I was 'so hurted.'"

Ranee smiled and sighed at these tender recollections.

Then she folded her hands gravely and commenced her recantation.

"Vera was quite right," she said, "and Peter was a sensible boy when he recommended her to talk things over with her, and she certainly saw things in a different light now. Very likely Mr. Ashton would be hurt if she refused to accept the allowance." A purr of approval from Vera here. "No doubt he thought it would put things on a comfortable footing, and make her feel more at home." "Hear! hear!" murmured Vera. "Of course it could not be home, though she loved the Garth;" but as she said this Ranee was vaguely conscious that it seemed to grow dearer to her every day. Would she really be ready to give it up—"the haunt of ancient peace," lying in its still orchards? But she silenced the smaller inner voice and hurried on.

"She would speak to Peter, and give him a proper message for Mr. Ashton, and tell him that she would gratefully accept his offer for the future, but she would not wish it to commence until Michaelmas.

"It will not be much more than six months then," she continued, "and until Michaelmas I shall desire to be treated as a visitor. After that Mr. Ashton can do as he likes." And Vera, charmed with this concession, had the tact to say no more.

"I am quite sure Peter will be pleased," she observed when Ranee had finished. "You see, he hardly liked to influence you, but of course it must be a good thing for him to have one of his sisters provided for. You see I am his housekeeper, and until he marries he could hardly do without me. As it is, I am afraid Sallie is getting things into a dreadful muddle. Sallie's tastes are Bohemian; she soars above domestic details. Peter tells

me the coffee is not nearly so good at breakfast, and that if Judith did not interfere they would have nothing but chops and steaks for dinner."

Ranee was obviously amused at this. "Poor dear Peter!"

"Ray," continued Vera, "has it struck you that Peter does not seem quite so bright as usual? I don't mean that things are going wrong in any way, for he has more work than usual, but he has not been so lively lately."

"I have noticed the same thing myself," returned Ranee. "He is rather jumpy at times, as though it worried him to sit still and talk."

"That's what I mean!" exclaimed Vera. "He is a little more uneven than usual; though he is as dear as possible when he comes to Godstone. But Sallie tells me that he seems rather down at times, and that more than once he scarcely spoke a word to her during supper." This was so unlike Peter that Ranee felt alarmed.

"He must have been tired, or some patient was giving him anxiety and he was thinking over the case," she said at last.

"That was what I said to Sallie," returned her sister, "but she did not seem to think so. She declared Peter had said at breakfast that he had no bad cases, and he thought he should take a holiday soon. But it was something else that Sallie said that made me uneasy." Then Ranee looked at her anxiously. Vera went on:

"Sallie says he has been so restless in his room the last two or three nights; that she has heard him moving about quite late, and she is sure he has not slept as well as usual, he looked so tired in the morning. But when

she told him so, he did not seem to like her noticing it, and said the nights were so hot that he did not see how people could sleep. And then he grumbled about the coffee, and said it was poor stuff, and that Judith must make him a cup of tea, and Sallie did not dare say any more. That is why I am glad I am going home soon, for really Sallie's coffee is not fit to drink." Vera paused here, for Rane was making big eyes at her, as the children say.

"Vera, do you think Peter is going to be ill?" she asked solemnly. But Vera smiled and shook her head.

"I never saw him look better in his life. No; it is Sallie's housekeeping that worries him. He likes a proper change of food, and nice hot coffee, as any man would, and it is perfectly right and natural that he should grumble."

"But cold coffee and Sallie's deficiencies would not make him restless at night," returned Ranee in a portentous voice; and her eyes were so full of unutterable meaning that Vera at once became serious.

"Oh, Ray, impossible—it could not be that!" And then Vera's cheeks became pink with excitement. "You don't think that Peter, our dear old Peter, is in love!"

"It looks rather like it; and it is certainly not cold coffee." And then in a whisper that would have done credit to Mrs. Siddons in her character of Lady Macbeth: "Oh, Vera, if it has come at last! And who can she be?"

But Vera could find no answer to this; she only re-echoed Ranee's words in parrot-like fashion—"Who can she be?"

Chapter XXX

"HER NAME IS——"

In the glances of his eye,
A penetrating, keen, and sly
Expression found its home.
Marmion.

Thou art a brave lad, and with a heart always right the head can seldom be wrong.—*Anne of Geierstein.*

RANEE returned to the Garth in a state of suppressed excitement; the prospect of a long day at home filled her with delightful anticipations. And when she asked Alix if she could spare her, the girl had answered her very sweetly:

"Dear Ranee, I hope I am not so selfish that I should begrudge you a holiday, when you have sacrificed yourself for me all these months. You know I do not mind being alone now; besides, I have father." For during the early days of her sorrow the father and daughter were much together. Mr. Ashton did all in his power to rouse Alix from her brooding sadness. He gave up his own pursuits to drive her out. Very often he coaxed her into his workshop, where she would sit at her work and watch him as he worked; or he would invite the girls into the library of an evening and read to them something he thought would interest them.

Alix's gentle nature responded to her father's devotion, and she accepted all his advances with gratitude. If he

expressed a wish she was always anxious to carry it out, and Ranee sometimes feared that she overtaxed her strength to please him.

"I am sure Mr. Ashton would not wish you to take that long drive with him, Alix, if he knew you were so tired," Ranee said one morning, when the girl had complained of a headache. "It would be far better for you to lie down in a cool room." But Alix would not hear of this.

"Oh, please do not tell him," she said. "If you knew how I hate to disappoint him! He is so good and patient —he never says a word if I am dull and stupid. The other day, when I could not help crying, he just put down his carving tools and came and stood beside me and stroked my hair. 'Poor little girl,' he said, 'but you will feel better soon.' And he took me out into the garden and told me to sit quiet and not talk, and that as soon as he had done his work he would come to me. Oh, no mother could have been more tender. And when he came back to me I did so long to put my arms round his neck and tell him what a comfort he is to me."

Alix was always making these little speeches. It was a new and strange thing to feel herself the object of her father's tenderness. He had forgiven her as only a large, generous nature can forgive, and there was now no shadow of a cloud between them. In Alix's case love had cast out fear. For even in our dealings with our fellow-creatures the Divine words hold good—"She loved much, because much had been forgiven her."

If only Alix had the moral strength to rise above her trouble—if only the inward bruises would show signs of healing! "We must give her time," Dr. Weston had said to the Squire. "She is very sensitive, and she has

had a shock. Let her lie in the air as much as possible, and try and interest her." And Mr. Ashton and Ranee had faithfully tried to carry out this recipe.

Ranee rose unusually early on Thursday. Mr. Ashton saw her running down the orchard paths with Flossie gambolling beside her long before he left his dressing-room; and she came to the breakfast-table looking so bright and fresh, as she laid a posy of wild-flowers beside Alix's plate, that he smiled at her and said quietly, "Good morning, Hebe!" And indeed that morning Ranee looked the embodiment of youth and health and energy. Ranee blushed and dimpled at her new name.

"Oh, it seemed a shame to waste such a lovely morning in bed!" she exclaimed. "I just longed to be out with the blackbirds and thrushes, and to see all the spider-webs gemmed with dewdrops and shining like diamonds in the sunshine. The world is so still and beautiful in the early morning." And here she ceased, as Alix entered the room.

Perhaps the sight of Alix's frail girlish figure in her black gown, with her pale, sad face, offered too painful a contrast at that moment, for the appreciative smile died away on Mr. Ashton's lip, and his old gravity returned as he applied himself to his breakfast.

Ranee was to meet Vera outside the school-house, just beyond the lodge gates, and as Ranee turned the corner she could see her hurrying down the avenue. "I thought I should be first," she said breathlessly, "but Bear kept me." And then the two girls walked on in high spirits.

Sallie was on the watch for them, and gave them a rapturous reception. Waif, too, welcomed them in the usual boisterous canine fashion. Then they went into

the kitchen to see Judith, who received them with unfeigned pleasure.

"I was saying to the Doctor only yesterday that the house is not like itself without our young ladies," observed Judith in her deep voice. "Aye, but you are a sight for sore eyes, and I am bound that Miss Sallie thinks so;" and Judith dried her floury hands on her coarse apron as she spoke. For Judith had grown to love her young mistresses, though from the first Vera had been her favourite.

When a few household matters had been discussed with Judith and the garden visited, the Council of Three adjourned to the upper regions, and a weighty discussion of ways and means ensued. Measurements were taken and items jotted down in Vera's note-book. Not only a new bedstead but a new carpet would be required to make the room decently comfortable.

Ranee assented to all Vera's propositions, and, contrary to her usual habit, she did not receive a single suggestion; she was so reasonable and acquiescent that Vera looked at her more than once in surprise.

"You are quite sure that I am not too extravagant?" she asked once, when it had been decided that the new carpet should be for the girls' room and the old faded one put in the attic. "I shall tell Peter that we shall buy the new things with Bear's money."

"Oh no, we must have things comfortable for the child," returned Ranee hastily. More than once her attention had wandered from the subject. Why did the dear home look so shabby to her that morning? she was asking herself. Somehow the faded carpets and worn coverings had never struck her so much before. Was her luxurious life really spoiling her? The beautiful,

quaint old rooms at the Garth rose before her mental vision, with their wonderful old cabinets and objects of vertu—everything harmonious and in good taste. And then the well-ordered service, the smoothness and efficiency of the domestic machinery. Ranee shrank a little involuntarily when she saw Judith in her coarse apron bringing in the pudding she had so proudly prepared. It offered such a contrast to Walton's noiseless service. "And if I stay I shall get more and more used to luxury," she told herself sadly, "and the Red House will seem shabbier and more cramped than ever. And yet how am I to help it?" And Ranee looked a little thoughtful as she followed her sisters into the dark little dining-room, with its narrow windows and wire blinds and hard horse-hair seats, very much the worse for wear.

Ranee wondered if Vera felt the same, but she was ashamed to ask the question; and then she resolutely banished these unworthy misgivings, and they were soon as merry as ever.

As soon as luncheon was over they ran across to Wynyards and spent a delightful hour with Margaret, who made much of them, and feasted them on delicious peaches and nectarines that had just been sent to her.

Margaret would willingly have kept them longer, but they were bent on returning home in case Peter should turn up. He might come back quite early in the afternoon, and they wanted to surprise him. No one had dropped a hint, and Peter had no idea of the little family gathering that awaited him.

"Judith is baking scones, and she has made some of Ranee's favourite biscuits," announced Sallie, who had been nervously anxious about her housekeeping, "and there is strawberry jam and greengages."

Then Margaret, who had been arranging half-a-dozen peaches in a little basket, handed them to Sallie with a smile. "This will look very nice on the tea-table," she said. But she gazed after them rather thoughtfully as they crossed the road. "Dear, sweet things," she said to herself; and for some strange occult reason those three bright faces haunted Margaret rather sadly.

Sallie was Jack-in-Office that evening, Ranee had observed; in other words, she was to be tea-maker. And then she pulled Vera down on the big couch, and Waif snuggled beside them, and their tongues were soon clacking as busily as ever. It was a little damping that Peter was late. Ranee and Vera went by turns to the front door to look for him. Sallie insisted at last that they should begin without him or the scones would be spoiled; but though her sisters yielded to her, the meal was not as festive as luncheon had been.

"When one is expecting a person who never comes, it seems to give one pins and needles all over one's system," observed Ranee vaguely. "And really if Peter does not soon turn up we shall not have time for our talk." But even as she spoke they heard the welcome sound of the latchkey, and the next moment Peter walked into the room.

His face lighted up with pleasure as he saw the three girls. "What! all my pretty chickens at one fell swoop!" he observed tragically. And then with ostentatious effort he steadied himself to resist the rush of the sisterhood, for he knew by old experience that Vera and Ranee would each try to be first.

"Peter, you bad boy, why are you so late?" And then they made him sit down, with a sister on each side of

him and a little table in front; and Sallie waited on him and served him with scones and strawberry jam, which Peter received with Sultan-like condescension.

Peter had been walking fast and looked a little hot; and he had a lovely Gloire de Dijon rose in his button-hole, and looked a very smart Peter indeed; and his blue eyes were strangely bright, and now and then under his fair moustache his lip curled in a little smile, as though something amused him; and Ranee thought how handsome he looked, and wondered if she and Vera were wrong in that mysterious surmise of theirs about that visionary Lady of Dreams; for at that moment Peter looked very unlike a man crossed in love.

"Well, little girls," he said benignly, as he helped himself to a peach, "what brought you over to the Red House this afternoon? I had half a mind to tool over to the Garth this evening, if you had not been so exceedingly previous."

"Oh Peter, not really!" in rather a regretful tone. "But never mind, it is far nicer like this." And Ranee gave his arm a little squeeze.

"Oh yes, of course," returned Peter hastily. Then in a sort of aside, "Though it is not so easy to talk to three as to one, especially when they are three chattering young women." Then they all laughed, not imagining, poor dears, that Peter was quite serious when he made this remark.

"Had you anything special to tell me?" went on Ranee innocently.

Then Peter grew very red and bit his lip, and there was a wicked little gleam in his eyes. But the next moment he said quite composedly, "I thought you girls might have something to say first." And then Vera at

once plunged into her story. Ranee only interrupted her twice.

It was evident that Peter's thoughts were elsewhere, and that it needed an effort to give his undivided attention; but he managed to grasp the situation.

"Wait a moment," when Vera had finished. "You say Sir Heber approves of this plan?"

"Oh dear, yes! He was really quite pleased about it; and he told us that he should come over very often to see Bear. We only want to know what you think about it, Peter."

"Well, it is not a bad plan, and if you do not mind the trouble. Bear is rather an exacting little lady."

"Oh, she is a dear, and I should love to have her," returned Vera enthusiastically; "and Sallie would love it too. And if you would not mind, Peter?"

"Oh, I have no objection," he returned quickly; "I rather like Bear myself. How long shall you want to keep her, Vera?"

"Well, I hardly know. Damaris is to leave at the end of October, and she would like Bear to come to me then. She thinks she will probably be away until the beginning of April, but of course that is not quite decided. Do you think that would be too long?"

Peter considered a moment, then he said slowly, "No, I think we can keep her until then." His manner was enigmatical, and rather puzzled Vera.

"They are sure to pay handsomely," she continued. "Damaris said so quite plainly. There are a few things I shall have to buy." But Peter waved all this aside. He had not time to go into details this evening, he said. They could discuss all that another day. Vera could get what she required for the child, for he had done well

this quarter, and there was likely to be a nice balance in his favour. And talking about money, he wondered if Ra had made up her mind on the subject they had discussed together, and what answer she meant to give Mr. Ashton. Then Ranee's cheeks grew suddenly hot.

"Of course I wanted to talk to you about that, Peter," she began. "I took your advice and consulted Vera, and I found she agreed with you. So," clearing her voice, which was not quite steady, "I have made up my mind to accept Mr. Ashton's offer; and will you tell him, Peter, that though I never dreamt of such a thing, and though I don't like it one little bit—— No, don't tell him that, only that I accept his kindness very gratefully, though I don't feel I shall earn my allowance fairly. You must give him a very nice message."

Then Peter looked exceedingly pleased, and patted the glossy head approvingly. "Bravo, little 'un," he said; "you have done your level best to be a good girl, and you may go to the top of the class."

"I wish Peter had not seemed so pleased to get rid of me," Ranee said to herself afterwards, for she could not quite eject the offshoot of that "pure cussedness" which, in Peter's opinion, throve far too well in a weedy corner of Ra's nature.

"Well, now we have settled all these matters," continued Peter, "I suppose I may have my innings. The fact is"—here he twitched his moustache rather nervously—"I have something rather important to tell you girls. I don't want to startle you, but—but—I am thinking of getting married."

"Peter!" The rising crescendo of three young voices made Waif bark wildly, as a vision of cats, black, white, and grey, roused him from his slumber.

"Hush, be quiet, Waif. Sallie, please turn him out. My dears, I am quite serious, I am not joking. I am engaged." Then Ranee gave a litle gasp, as though she had taken a sudden shower-bath which impeded her breath; but Vera's eyes were full of reproach.

"Engaged—really engaged! and you never told us, Peter; and we never even guessed!" and here Vera waxed tearful.

"A man cannot always talk about such things;" but Peter had the grace to look rather ashamed of himself. "I did not want any of you to know what was going on. I was rather glad you were both away; and I know Sallie found me poor company. You need not be hurt with me, Ra," looking at her downcast face rather anxiously, "for it was only settled yesterday. And I was coming over to the Garth to tell you this evening; there were reasons why I thought you ought to know first." But here Peter paused, as though he found it difficult to go on.

It was at this crucial moment that Sallie suddenly broke in. "But you have not told us her name, Peter. Is it any one that we know?" Then there was a sudden flash from Peter's blue eyes.

"Yes, you all know her," he said, "and Ra has always liked her. And she is one of the finest creatures that ever walked this earth, and her name is Hannah Burke."

Chapter XXXI

"LIKE A STRONG, COMFORTING ANGEL"

Am I not the nobler thro' thy love,
O three times less unworthy? Likewise thou
Art more thro' love and greater than thy years.
TENNYSON.

The only love worthy of the name ever and always uplifts.—MACDONALD.

THERE was a moment's silence! Three blank young faces, with wide, startled eyes, confronted Peter. But of all the girls Ranee's feelings were the most intense: to register, to describe them would have been impossible, they baffled her own comprehension. She was no longer under a shower-bath—she had recovered her breath. But she felt as though groping in a fog, and some horn—or was it Peter's voice shrieked in her ears—"Her name is Hannah Burke—Hannah Burke!" over and over again.

It was the sort of name that lent itself to repetition, Ranee thought; it glided off one's tongue so smoothly. "Hannah Burke—Hannah Burke!"—her old friend, Hannah, "one of the finest creatures that ever walked this earth!" And here Ranee wanted to laugh.

She always did laugh at the wrong moment—when somebody fell downstairs or hit their head against the mantelpiece. It was not want of feeling, she told her-

self, only "pure cussedness;" no, she did not mean that —it was only nervousness. And here she would have giggled, only Peter was eyeing her sternly.

"What's the trouble?" he said rather sharply. "None of you look over-pleased with the news; and yet you have told me a dozen times that I ought to get married."

"Oh, it is not that," returned Vera, for Ranee seemed possessed with a dumb devil. "We always wanted you to be happy, Peter;" and here Vera dissolved into tears. "It is not selfishness, is it, Ray? But I cannot—I really cannot believe it. Hannah Burke!" And then the foghorn began again in Ranee's brain; "Hannah Burke—Hannah Burke!" For, as Ranee had once said, in a sportive moment, her head was very small, like the grey goose in "Jackanapes," and could not hold more than one idea at a time—which was certainly a libel—and if she said "ga, ga" and ran away, it was all that one could expect under the circumstances.

Perhaps the glimmering of an idea came to Peter at last, for he left the room quickly and returned with a glass of water, and told Ranee to drink a little, and not bother her head to talk until she felt less nebulous. And Ranee thanked him and sipped a little, and the desire to laugh left her; and then she sipped some more and then pulled herself together, and there was Peter watching her with his old kind smile.

"Better, little 'un? That's right. I am afraid I blurted it out too quickly. But I never thought you would take it like this."

"I am sorry," murmured Ranee, for she knew she was behaving badly. But it was wrong of Peter to startle them like this. He must have known that such an idea had never entered their heads. Hannah was a good

woman, and so was Margaret Weston, but she did not want either of them for a sister-in-law.

She would not tell Peter so, of course. She must say something kind, for the dear fellow had been quite damped by the wet blanket presented to him. But before she could begin her little speech, Vera broke in again, for she was in that state of incredulous and remonstrant grief that needed expression.

"Oh, Peter, don't be vexed! But I can't believe it. Miss Burke must be years older than you. I never think of her as young at all."

"She is only three years older," returned Peter bluntly. "In my opinion age does not count much in the matter. If Hannah were forty-three instead of thirty-three"—and here Peter straightened himself, and there was an obstinate expression on his face—"I should still say, as I do now, that she is the only woman I wish to marry."

"Oh, Peter"—it was little Sallie who spoke—"do you really mean that you are in love with her?" Then the brightness returned to Peter's eyes, and though he looked somewhat shy, he stuck to his guns gallantly.

"Yes, Sallie Lunn"—one of his names for her—"I do mean it, and if you are a good child and mind your manners, you will be in love yourself some day; and then you won't talk about people's ages, Vera, any more than you would about their complexions. It will be just you and that other person, and a snap for the rest of the world." And Peter looked so handsome and defiant, and so well satisfied with himself, and was altogether such a magnificent and opinionated young Briton, that Vera wept afresh, in a perfect anguish of disappointment and tenderness; and Ranee, holding herself in very tightly, stared at him as though he were talking an unintelligible

language and she was trying to understand a word here and there.

"Well, Ra, a penny—twopence—even a whole sixpence for your thoughts"—for Peter was getting reckless. "Supposing you say something—good, bad, or indifferent: here beginneth the third chapter of the Lamentations of Ranee." But for once Peter was not checked for his profanity.

"Peter," in a low voice, "I don't think we are at all nice to you." This was so obvious to Peter's intelligence that he merely nodded his acquiescence.

"We ought to have said something kind and have wished you joy. And," with sudden irritation, "it is silly of Vera to cry in that ridiculous fashion. But," swallowing hard, "I could not help feeling upset myself; it was so very sudden and so very unexpected;" and here Ranee's voice trembled a little.

"It is the unexpected that always happens," remarked Peter sententiously. "Fire away, little 'un."

"We have always thought so much about your marrying," went on Ranee. "Vera and I have talked about it for the hour together, and Sallie too. The future Mrs. Peter—well, that was always a joke with us"—and here Ranee gave a dreary little laugh—"and if we saw any one nice——" But Peter waved her to silence with a lordly hand.

"Bless your innocent heart, do you think I do not know that, once upon a time, there was a woman named Damaris"—here Ranee and Vera exchanged a guilty glance—"and there was even a fair-haired little girl placed on the list? Oh, you poor little designing matchmakers, and all the time it was Hannah whom I wanted, Ra." And here Peter's tone changed. "I thought you were

her friend, and that you at least would have been ready to welcome her as your sister. But I see she is right."

"Oh, Peter, what can you mean?"

"I mean that the wooin' o't has not been as easy as you think," returned Peter rather sternly. "From the first Hannah has feared that you would all be sorry about this. 'Even Ranee will not like it,' she said to me last night; and then she made me promise to go over to the Garth this evening."

"That was kind of her."

"My dear, you do not know Hannah. If you did, you would congratulate me for having won such a woman for my wife. I daresay you think her homely, and remember that she came of humble parentage. Do you suppose either of us are ashamed of that! She is the truest woman I have ever seen. She is the sort of person that one does not often meet, for she thinks less of herself than other people, and never says an insincere word, or pretends to be other than she is; and her heart is so full of love for her fellow-creatures that she feels she can never do enough for them." And here Peter paused, not because he had exhausted his subject, but because, being an Englishman, he was afraid of becoming too emotional.

They had talked so long that the summer dusk was stealing into the room. Vera, who had at last checked her tears, was sitting in dejected silence with Sallie leaning against her. It was the usual family heap, but on this occasion the sisterhood was a limp bundle of woe. Waif, who had noisily clamoured for admittance, had at last turned sulky and taken refuge with Judith. It was at this moment that Ranee slipped her hand into Peter's.

"Have you cared for her long?" she whispered. But

they were all surprised to hear that Peter had been drawn to her long before Mrs. Wallace's death.

"When I saw her so tender and loving with the old woman, I could not help admiring her then; but I knew what she was to me when I asked you girls to call."

"Oh, Peter, and you were so good and patient with us. But we never guessed. How could we, dear?" And in the dusky light Ranee laid her cheek against his shoulder. "Indeed we will do our best, Vera and I, and will try and love her for your sake." And after this little speech they all kissed him very solemnly; and then Vera said she really must go, or Damaris would be organising a search-party; and then she proposed that Peter should walk part of the way with them, and Sallie said she would come too.

It was moonlight before they left the Red House. Margaret Weston, who was taking an evening stroll with her father, came upon the little party walking briskly down St. Andrew's Street. Peter's tall figure was in the middle, his golf-cap set rather rakishly on one side, and a sister hanging on either arm, Sallie keeping step bravely beside them, and they were all talking so earnestly that they did not even see her.

"So he has told them," Margaret said to herself with a smile, for both she and her father were in the secret; she had congratulated him that very morning, and told him that there were two people in Abbey-Thorpe who approved of his choice.

"I think I must go over to the Garth and see Ranee to-morrow," Margaret observed, when Peter and his satellites had disappeared into space.

But, after all, Margaret had her long walk for nothing, for Alix, who was lying down with a headache, sent

word by Mrs. Binney that Ranee had gone to Wayside, and would not be back until quite late in the evening; and though Margaret was disappointed at losing her talk with Ranee, she felt that she was doing the right thing.

It was Peter who had proposed the visit to Wayside.

They had walked with Vera to the lodge gates, and then the three had made their way over the fields towards Marshlands. And Peter had become very confidential, and had said a good many nice things to his sisters. But once, when Sallie had lingered a moment to admire some curious effect of light and shade—a pall of moonlight broken by a bar of blackness—Peter seized the opportunity to say hurriedly, "Ra, will you go and see Hannah to-morrow?" And as she hesitated, he continued, "I am sure she will expect you. Put yourself in her place; she thinks I am telling you about our engagement this evening, and I know she is feeling rather worried and nervous. She is so afraid that you and Vera will not approve; it will only be kind to go to her."

"Yes, I see; very well, Peter;" but Ranee sighed furtively.

"You might have tea with her," in a coaxing voice. "And if I can get my work done I will join you, and then perhaps we could walk part of the way back with you." And Ranee, who was full of remorse for her extraordinary behaviour earlier in the evening, agreed to this. And then, as Sallie ran up to them, nothing more was said, only Peter's parting kiss was warmer than usual.

She found Alix waiting up for her in the drawing-room. She looked a little curiously at Ranee's flushed face. Ranee would have preferred to keep her own

counsel, but she could see that Alix's suspicion was aroused.

"It is very late, and you look as though you have not enjoyed your holiday, Ray." And then it all came out. But to Ranee's intense surprise Alix took it very quietly.

"I always thought that would happen," she said; "I could see how much Dr. Holt cared for her. It was not what he said, for he scarcely spoke to her, but once or twice when Hannah came into the room his manner changed, and then I knew."

"I ought to have known too, if I had not been as blind as a bat."

"Oh no, you are different," returned Alix softly. "It is only when one loves that one is clear-sighted for others. When Dr. Holt looked at Hannah, it was easy to see that she was the light of his eyes."

"And Hannah, did she seem to notice?"

"I cannot tell you that—Hannah is so very quiet; but I think she knew. You are right to do as your brother wishes, Ranee, and you must be very kind to Hannah for his sake."

"Yes, I suppose so. But, Alix, there is one thing I want to ask you. I know you are fond of her—but then she has been your nurse and you have grown to depend upon her, for she was so good to you in your trouble—but does it not surprise you that Peter should have chosen her?"

"No, I don't think I am surprised, Ray. I always knew that Dr. Holt was a sensible man, and likely to take broad views on such matters."

"But she is not a gentlewoman by birth," returned Ranee in a low voice. "Oh, you know all about that, so what is the use of repeating it? Her father was only a

carpenter and her mother was a factory girl; and good and sweet as Hannah is, one is sometimes reminded that she comes of humble folk. Oh, I hate to say it, Alix, but Peter has always been so fastidious and critical."

"All the more honour to him that he has discovered the sterling gold of her character," returned Alix, with unusual warmth. "Ranee, you must not say these things to me, for I have grown to love Hannah so dearly, so dearly. She was like a strong, comforting angel after my dear Nicholas was killed, and I shall never, never forget her goodness to me.

"Oh, she may not be one of your fine ladies," continued the girl tenderly, "but I think she is the sort that the angels must love. 'Our Lady of Pity,' that is one of the names they used to give the Blessed Virgin. 'Our Lady of Pity,' the name used to come into my head sometimes when I woke in the night—oh, those night wakings!—and saw Hannah's face bending over me. How could I help loving her?" finished Alix simply; "and I think the angels love her too."

Chapter XXXII

"ONE CANNOT EXPLAIN MIRACLES"

Tinsel may impose upon one for a short time, but sterling coin will always and everywhere pass current.—LORD CHESTERFIELD.

From this close inspection of pure hearts, we have learnt to think nobly of human nature and hopefully of the Providence of God.—ROBERTSON.

RANEE had been much impressed by Alix's generous eulogium of Hannah. Alix was always emotional, but it was evident that she meant every word she said. If Alix, gently natured and refined as she was, thought so highly of Hannah Burke, and spoke of her with such sweet appreciation, what right had she and Vera to object to her as a sister-in-law?

"And I always liked her from the first," thought Ranee as she tossed restlessly on her pillow. "But Peter's wife—our own dear Peter! And we wanted him to have some one so young and pretty and charming and good." And Ranee groaned afresh as she thought of that impossible combination of feminine loveliness and virtue that was to crown that immaculate creature. "The desire of the moth for the star" was only equalled by Ranee's insatiable ambition for that beloved Peter; and now behold their Fair Lady of Dreams had really come in the flesh, and proved herself nothing but an excellent and dowdy young woman. In after years Ranee was very frank in diagnosing her feelings on that night.

"I was just a horrid little cat," she said to Hannah, "and I longed to claw somebody. Oh, don't laugh!" as an amused smile crossed her sister-in-law's face. "I really think that for an hour at least I quite hated you, and wished you and Wayside at the bottom of the deep, deep sea; for I felt in such a rage that you had got my Peter. And then I remembered what Alix said, and how the dear boy had looked—so proud and happy and cocksure of himself—like a chicken, you know, who has just chipped his shell and walked out, and thinks the whole world belongs to him, and he was monarch of all he surveyed, and a lot more." And here Ranee had paused for lack of breath; but the smile was still on Hannah's face.

"Yes, dear, I understand," she said quietly; "and I don't think I have ever ceased to wonder at it myself."

Ranee scolded herself into a better frame of mind presently, and before she slept she registered a solemn resolution to be good to Hannah. "If Peter loves her, I have just got to make the best of it and love her too," she said to herself. And as soon as she had made this clear to herself, Ranee grew drowsy, and soon became unconscious of her troubles.

She started for Wayside early in the afternoon. Alix offered her the carriage, but she shook her head. "I would rather walk," she said; "there will be shade all the way." But she looked such a subdued, dejected little person as she spoke, that Alix felt quite sorry for her.

The door at Wayside was often open when the mistress was at home; for Hannah liked to put down her work when she felt restless and go out among her flowers. She had evidently been gathering roses earlier in the afternoon, for there were pink and crimson petals

on the door-mat, and her gardening gloves lay beside her hat. How cool the little hall felt. The sitting-room door was also open, and Ranee caught a glimpse of a grey gown. She drew a quick little breath, but she did not hesitate. Hannah, who was working by the open window in the ingle-nook that looked over the lawn, grew very pale when she saw her.

"I did not hear you in the porch," she said rather nervously; "you were very quiet." And then they stood holding each other's hands. But Hannah had not kissed her as usual, and her manner was a little constrained.

"Peter asked me to come——" began Ranee.

"Yes, I know; he told me so last night. I wish—I wish you had come of your own accord, Ranee." And there was a pained, yearning note in Hannah's voice. And then she suddenly put her hands on the girl's shoulders, and her grey eyes were very sad and tender.

"My dear, you and Vera need not try to hide anything from me. Do you think I do not know all about it? You are full of trouble, both of you, because I have promised to marry your dear brother; and yet how am I to help it, when we love each other?"

Ranee gave her a startled look. It seemed to her as though some wonderful change had passed over Hannah. Could it be that love had transformed her? She looked half-a-dozen years younger. Her usually pale complexion was a little flushed, and there was a depth and brightness in her eyes that surprised the girl. She had dressed herself with unusual care, and her reddish-brown hair had a beautiful coppery tint in the sunshine. "Many people would call her handsome," Ranee thought, and this idea gave her pleasure. The next moment Hannah put her gently into a seat and sat down beside her.

"Shall we talk about it a little, Ranee?" she continued, "and then perhaps we shall both feel more natural. 'You and Ra had better have it out together'—that is what Peter said to me last night." Hannah's tone lingered a little over her lover's name—half shyly and half caressingly. "Oh, he is so fond of you, Ranee; I think of all his sisters you are the one dearest to him. It was you whom he wanted to tell first."

Ranee's lip quivered, but she made no reply. Her heart had long told her that she was Peter's favourite. It was her opinion that he always asked first; Vera could not influence him as she could.

"'I think Ra will be pleased about this; you and she have been such cronies.' That was what he said to me. But I knew better than that. I think men often make these mistakes."

"It was strange that he should say that." And then Ranee added sorrowfully to herself, "How I must have disappointed him!"

"Yes, it was strange," repeated Hannah quietly; "but his own wishes misled him. Do you know, I refused to listen to him for a long time? 'Your sisters will not like it,' I said to him; 'and I love them too dearly to bring trouble to them.' And though it half broke my heart to say the words, I refused to marry him. For, though I am a carpenter's daughter, I have my pride; and I know there would never be any peace either for him or me if I were to come between you and your brother."

"And you refused him?"

"Yes, my dear, I did, though the words nearly choked me, for I was loving him all the time. Oh, how angry he was with me! You see he suspected my secret; for I was a poor actor, Ranee. And when he could not bring

me to reason, he just flung out of the house; for Peter can be masterful at times. Oh, how miserable I was! I used to cry half the night. But he never came near me for weeks. Oh, he knew what he was about, and that absence would make me want him all the more."

"It was noble of you to give him up for our sakes, Hannah."

"Oh, my dear," with a faint smile, "my nobility did not last long: he and my own heart were too much for me. After a time, when he thought I had been punished sufficiently, he came back as though nothing had happened, and we were the best of friends. That was before I went to the Garth; but even there I saw him three or four times a week. He was very quiet, and never took much notice of me before Alix, but I knew—I knew. And sometimes when he had gone I was so happy that my heart used to sing for joy, like a bird in the sunshine, for it seemed such a wonderful thing that he could care for me"—and Hannah's deep voice sank into a whisper.

"And then he asked you again?"

"Yes, the very night I came home. But I did not give him any answer. We had a long talk, and I tried to make him understand all the difficulties; but he brushed them aside like so many cobwebs. I thought he was going to be angry again, but he controlled himself. 'Who cares if your father began life as a working carpenter,' he said quite sharply; 'he was a builder before he died, was he not? And if your mother was a factory girl when he married her, she was a good, honest woman like her daughter.' Oh, how proud I was when he said that; for no lady could have done her duty better and set us a finer example than mother did. But there, though we talked like this, he could not master

me that night. It was only two evenings ago—— but I cannot talk about that." And here Hannah blushed like a girl, and she looked so shy and conscious that Ranee could not help smiling. "He just took his own way, and there was no resisting him; for he would not take no for an answer, so I was forced to say yes. And that is the long and short of it."

"Thank you, Hannah," returned Ranee humbly; and then she heaved a long-drawn sigh. "I want to say something. I have not been nice to either you or Peter. I did not want him to marry you."

If Hannah winced inwardly at this plain speaking, outwardly she did not turn a hair. "Dear Ranee, I know all about that, and of course you were right. Your brother ought to have married a very different woman."

"But I am not so sure about it now," continued Ranee; "I was a stuck-up, conceited little prig last night, and I quite wonder at Peter's patience with us all—for Vera was just as ridiculous. I must tell you something that he said to Sallie. He was telling her that one day she would be in love herself, and then she would know that such things as age or looks or family—I forget the exact words—would not matter one little bit: 'it will be just you and that other person, and a snap for the rest of the world.'"

"Did Peter say that?" murmured Hannah; "how dear of him! But it is true, Ranee, every word. And when I am with him I just laugh at the idea that anything can come between him and me. For though it is hard for you and Vera to believe it, I know that I am the only woman that can make him happy, just as I know that no other man could ever have been my husband. And why it is and how it is I cannot tell, for one can-

not explain miracles. But I know," finished Hannah with a lovely smile, "that God has been very good to bring us together."

"Hannah, will you forgive me? But you must forgive Vera too." Then Hannah took the girl very tenderly in her arms.

"Ranee, my dear, there was no need to say that. I knew if we talked a little we should soon understand each other, for you have always been so good to me. And then we both love Peter—that ought to make us feel like sisters to each other." And then there was a long, quiet kiss of reconciliation, and Ranee's heart was very full, and she was no longer unhappy.

They talked on for a little, and then Jane came in with the tea-tray, and Hannah rose to help her. Ranee sat still and watched her as she moved about the room. What a grand-looking woman she was! The well-fitting grey gown set off her fine figure; there was something harmonious and stately in her movements; and Ranee had never noticed before how finely her head was set on the massive white throat.

Without being beautiful, Hannah Burke was a noble-looking woman; and Ranee acknowledged to herself with inward relief that they would not have any reason to be ashamed of Peter's future wife. And as this thought passed through her mind Hannah sat down beside her again.

"There, we are only waiting for Jane to bring the hot cakes. I expect Peter will be here directly. Ranee, my dear, there is something I wish to say before he comes. You have always been my friend from the first, and have helped me more than you knew; and I want you to go on being good to me, and to tell me things as

you would Vera or Sallie, just as though we were real sisters. You see, I may make mistakes sometimes, not having come of gentle people; and I would not like to do things that Peter might disapprove—about my dress and little things of that kind, and the books I ought to read. It is dreadful to think how ignorant I am. But Peter only laughs at me when I tell him this. It seems as though everything I do or am pleases him at present, and that he will not trouble himself to find faults. But he will find them out in time, Ranee;" and here Hannah sighed.

"I am not so sure of that. Peter does not care much for clever women; he always says they are so fatiguing, and think so much of themselves. He likes them to be restful—so I am sure you will suit him. And you dress so nicely now, Hannah; that grey silk that you wore at Margaret's 'At Home' suited you so well." For Hannah Burke had appeared at that function about six weeks previously, looking so extremely well dressed that Mrs. Lugard had commented on it to Vera.

"She is not a bad-looking woman," she had said to her, "but she was rather out of it somehow. It was really very good-natured of Dr. Holt to talk to her so much; but for him and Ranee, the poor woman would have been very dull. I think it was mistaken kindness on Margaret's part to invite her, for no one else took much notice of her."

"Then you will not invite her to your garden-party, Damaris?"

"No, of course not," replied Mrs. Lugard, with a touch of sharpness in her tone. "I am not a very conventional person, but one must draw the line somewhere, and I draw it at Miss Burke."

It was this speech of Damaris's that came to Vera's recollection when Peter had announced his engagement to Miss Burke.

"What would Damaris say—would she draw the line at Peter too?" Vera wondered with a dreary little laugh; for Damaris was a very worldly-minded, time-serving little person.

Hannah looked pleased when Ranee said this, and still more as the girl went on rather shyly:

"Dear mother used to say that any one could be a lady if one chose—that innate refinement and absence of affectation and pretentiousness and real goodness of heart would transform any woman into a gentlewoman. 'I know the world holds a different opinion,' she once said, 'and that there is a vulgar class of person that attach undue importance to rank and wealth and smart dress. But many of your fine ladies are no better than the gingerbread queens you children brought back from the fair yesterday—hard, unwholesome, badly-spiced stuff under the tinsel.' And then, for it was Sunday evening, she opened her Bible and read to us the words of King Lemuel about 'the virtuous woman whose price is above rubies.'

"'That is the sort of woman I should like my girls to be,' mother said as she closed the book. 'Think of it, my dear Vera. She was not ashamed to work with her hands, and to make fine linen, and to sell it, although "her household was clothed in scarlet," and "her clothing was silk and purple"—the picture of a fine lady indeed.' How well Vera and I remember mother's voice as she said this."

"I wish I could have known your mother," returned Hannah rather wistfully. And then her colour rose as

a shadow crossed the window, and she left the room a little quickly.

It was some minutes before she came back, and then Peter was with her. Such a radiant, boyish-looking Peter. "Good old child!" he said benignly as he kissed Ranee. And then he sat down, beaming on them both like a blissful Buddha, as Ranee expressed it afterwards.

"Have you two hit it off, little 'un?" he asked, when Hannah, under the pretext of fetching something, had left them for a moment alone.

"Yes, Peter, and I want to tell you that I was a regular little beast last night, and I am very sorry that I was not nicer. And, Peter, she is a dear." Then did Peter rise solemnly from his seat and hug her. And at that uplifting and satisfying moment Hannah returned with a basket of ripe figs in her hand.

"Now we will have tea," she said quietly. "Will you give your sister a chair, Peter?" And then they took their places at the little round table.

Chapter XXXIII

SIR HEBER ACTS AS PEACEMAKER

Love does not spring up and grow great and become perfect all at once, but requires time and the nourishment of thoughts.—DANTE.

There is a way of killing truth by truths.—AMIEL.

RANEE was rather quiet during tea, but her thoughts were as busy as ever. She was admiring Peter in his new character, and watching him with loving eyes. How happy he and Hannah looked! How completely they understood each other! "If I ever marry," Ranee said to herself, as she followed the lovers out into the garden, "I hope he will be as nice as Peter, and treat me in just the same way, without fussing or being silly. Peter never loses a word that Hannah says, and it is beautiful to see the way he waits on her. I wish Vera could see them now;" and Ranee's eyes were just a little dim as she watched the two tall figures pacing the little lawn in the evening sunshine.

"There is no need for you to leave Wayside, dearest, if you love it so," Peter was saying; "if what I anticipate comes to pass, it would be better for me to leave the Red House." And then his voice dropped, and Ranee could not hear Hannah's answer.

How strange if Peter were to give up the Red House and live at Wayside, Ranee thought. Somehow such

an idea had never entered her head. The dear, dingy, ugly Red House, where they had been born! Well, of course Wayside would be far pleasanter; it was not big certainly, but she had once heard Peter say that it was the sort of house that could easily be enlarged. And how about the flat in town, and Sallie's art education? Somehow their scheme did not seem so inviting to her now. "Distance lends enchantment to the view," thought Ranee, as a sudden twinge crossed her at the idea of leaving the Garth. And then Peter and Hannah stood still and waited for her to join them, and they paced slowly up and down, talking first of one thing and then another, until Ranee said it was getting late and she must go, and Peter remembered that he had a patient to see before supper.

Hannah walked with them to the gate, and Peter lingered for a moment for a last parting word.

Ranee has been very good, has she not, love?" he whispered as he took her hand, and Hannah's smile was a sufficient answer. Never was there a happier woman than Hannah Burke that evening. The old lonely life was over; the heart-hunger of a loving nature was satisfied; love had come to her when she least expected it, and had crowned her with its deathless glory. "Oh, no wonder they love him so, for there is no one like Peter," she thought. "If only I were more worthy of him; but then he knows what I am;" and Hannah rested in this thought with sweet humility.

While Ranee was acquitting herself in this satisfactory manner, and being patted on the back metaphorically by Peter for behaving like a sensible child, poor Vera was going through a trying time.

She had not seen Damaris the previous night. She

had retired to bed with a headache, and much to Vera's relief they did not meet until luncheon the next day.

Vera was very reluctant to tell her the news, but she knew there was no use trying to keep it from her. Damaris was extremely curious, and she had already remarked more than once on Vera's tired looks. "I expect something went wrong," she observed, with a sharp glance. "Either you and Ranee had a quarrel, or——" But here Sir Heber changed the subject a little abruptly, for the servants were in the room, and Damaris's remark was hardly in good taste. She never could be made to understand that even well-trained servants had ears.

"I suppose I must tell her," thought Vera as they went back to the drawing-room; "I am afraid she will not be nice and sympathetic, but it cannot be helped." And then, without any preface, she blurted it out.

"I was rather upset yesterday, and so was Ranee. Peter has taken us by surprise; he is engaged; he is going to marry Miss Burke."

Damaris started. She stared at Vera for a moment, as though she could not believe she was serious. Then she burst out laughing. "Oh, it is too ridiculous," she said as soon as she could speak. "Dr. Holt and that red-haired woman! Vera, why did you not break it more gently? You have nearly killed me."

"I don't think there is anything to laugh at, Damaris," returned Vera, rather offended by this levity. But Damaris only laughed again.

"It is simply the most ridiculous thing I ever heard in my life," she went on. "Miss Burke! Why, bless the woman, she must be forty at least."

"She is nothing of the kind," returned Vera indignantly; "she is only thirty-three—only three years

older than Peter." But it was evident that Damaris chose to disbelieve this. Of course the Holt girls wanted to make the best of it.

"At any rate, she looks ten years older," she said drily; "she is a very mature young woman." And here Damaris laughed disagreeably. For some occult reason best known to herself she rather disliked Hannah Burke. Hannah's massive simplicity and broad, large nature did not appeal to Damaris—"the young woman at Wayside," as she often called her; for Dawtie could be a little vulgar at times.

She rather liked Dr. Holt. He was clever and personable—the sort of man whom it would be pleasant to have as a tame cat about the house. Damaris would have been quite willing to flirt with Peter if that very wide-awake young man had given her the ghost of an opening. But Peter had no opinion of the lively widow, and refused to be dragged at her chariot wheels. "She is looking out for a big catch—oh, I know the lady," he had said once to Margaret Weston. "She would land Colonel Underwood if she could, in spite of his half-a-dozen brats of all sorts and sizes. When his brother dies he will be next heir to the baronetcy, and the Underwoods are rolling in money. That would just suit Mrs. Lugard; she wants plenty of loaves and fishes—and a few entrées thrown in. A pretty stepmother she would make!" And Peter smiled superciliously; for he had taken Damaris's measure pretty accurately. And Margaret privately agreed with him.

"I think you might be kinder about it, Damaris," observed Vera in a hurt voice, "especially as you see we are all rather upset about it. But of course Peter has a right to choose his own wife; and as he is really in

love with her and seems very happy, Ranee and I mean to make the best of it."

"How very sweet of you!" returned Damaris, but her lip curled satirically. "I hope Dr. Holt was pleased with your submissive behaviour. You were always a meek little soul, Vera, but I should have thought Ranee would have had more spirit. But there, it is none of my business."

"I suppose it is no one's business but Peter's."

"Oh dear, no," returned Damaris coolly. "But I must say I expected better things of Dr. Holt. When a young man is starting a practice in a place like Abbey-Thorpe, he ought to be very careful whom he marries. Now, if your brother had an inclination for elderly young women, why on earth did he not propose to Margaret Weston? She is certainly rather plain, but then she is a lady"—here Vera, whose nature was rather sensitive, winced perceptibly—"and Dr. Weston would have taken his son-in-law into partnership. 'Weston and Holt,' how well that would have sounded! And really Margaret is a good creature."

"I am quite sure that Peter would never have thought of her," replied Vera; "they are far too old friends for that. Margaret always looked on Peter as a boy; she has seen him grow up."

"Yes, my dear, and Dr. Holt preferred red hair and a pale complexion. Well, there is no accounting for taste. I only hope he won't expect me to congratulate him, for I think he is doing the worst thing possible for himself and you all."

"Really, Damaris, I do think you are too hard on poor Hannah. We all like her, though we do not want Peter to marry her; but if she makes him a good

wife——" But Damaris, who was growing weary of the subject, yawned aggressively.

"My dear Vera, I see that you and Ranee are quite ready to welcome sister Hannah, but you must not expect your friends to share your enthusiasm. People will be civil to Dr. Holt, but I doubt if they will visit his wife. They know too much about her, you see; they remember when she was Mrs. Wallace's housekeeper"—with increasing animation. "Laura Townsend was speaking to me only the other day about Miss Burke—'Burke,' I think she called her," for Damaris was turning a little spiteful. "She remembered her quite well, bringing in the tea-tray, because the servant was out, in her white bib-apron, and Mrs. Wallace saying that 'Burke was such a good creature, and never minded putting her hand to anything.' And of course she is a good creature," finished Damaris, and there was a naughty sparkle in her eye. But Vera could bear no more; even a worm will turn, and Vera's patience was exhausted.

"I would rather not discuss the matter any more," she returned with dignity. "I am sorry you are not kinder about it, Damaris;" and Vera held her pretty little head rather high as she left the room, though her eyes were smarting with angry tears. Sir Heber, who was crossing the hall at the moment, looked at her in astonishment; but when he saw her wet eyes his manner softened.

"What is the matter?" he said kindly; "has any one been vexing you?" And then, as Vera seemed unwilling to answer, he drew her into a little side alcove by the staircase, where any one passing through the hall could not see them, for a large carved screen shut it from the outer hall. Bear always called it "the cubby-house,"

and liked to take her dolls there. It was rather a cosy little nook. There was a fireplace, with a bearskin rug in front of it; and a tall carved chair stood on either side of the wide window. A prettily inlaid cabinet, with old Chelsea china, occupied one corner. As Sir Heber put her in one of the heavy chairs Vera looked at him appealingly. Perhaps the kind, homely face gave her courage to speak.

"Oh, I am so unhappy!" she said. "Damaris is so hard, and says such things, though she sees how it hurts me;" and two great tears rolled down Vera's face. Ranee often said that she would not mind crying if she could look like Vera. "Her eyes just stream, but her eyelids never get red and swollen like other people. Sallie and I look such frights when we cry."

"Tell me all about it," returned Sir Heber quietly. He spoke as though it were Bear he was addressing, for his voice was quite coaxing. If Sir Heber felt a sudden tenderness for this beautiful young creature, if her gentleness and grief appealed irresistibly to him, he was careful that she should not see it.

"Damaris is not always good; you had better tell me all she said." And then Vera was induced to narrate her story.

It was evident to her that Sir Heber was intensely surprised. There was even a faint humorous gleam in his eyes, as though he were amused. "Dr. Holt has kept his secret well," he observed when Vera had finished; "I don't believe any one in Abbey-Thorpe suspected this."

"I am sure such an idea never entered our heads," returned Vera.

"And you and your sisters are not pleased about it?

That is a pity. I know very little of Miss Burke—I have only seen her two or three times at the Garth, and once at Dr. Weston's—but what I saw prepossessed me in her favour. She seemed rather a fine creature."

"Are you speaking of her outward appearance, Sir Heber?"

"I believe I was. I thought her a very good-looking woman, and I particularly admired the peculiar coppery tint of her hair. It is so uncommon. You look surprised, Miss Holt, but I am naturally an observant person, and very little escapes me."

"And you admired Hannah Burke!" Vera's tone was a little incredulous, but all the same she was pleased.

"Yes, I think I may say so without hesitation. She is the sort of woman who will improve and mellow with time, like good wine. I am rather impressed by Dr. Holt's discrimination."

"Peter is very much in love," observed Vera in a dolorous voice. Then again the humorous gleam came in Sir Heber's eyes.

"So he ought to be, if he means to marry her. And you may depend upon it, Miss Holt, that Miss Burke is quite worthy of his love. No one could talk with her for five minutes without discovering that she is a good, true-hearted woman, and I say emphatically all honour to your brother for finding this out for himself."

"Oh, thank you so much," sighed Vera, feeling strangely comforted. "If only Damaris had been kinder about it! But she implied that Hannah was not a lady, and that none of the best people would visit them. Oh, she was just horrid about it," finished Vera, whose pride had been much galled by that anecdote about "Burke."

"My dear Miss Holt," returned Sir Heber gently,

"surely you know Damaris by this time. She has never kept her tongue under proper control, and she allows herself a licence in speech that often gets her into trouble. Poor Nicholas used to tell her so. She used to make him very angry sometimes. But you must try to forgive her, for just now the poor little woman is hardly accountable for her temper."

"You mean that she is so unhappy? I am afraid I did not remember that this afternoon when she was laughing and jeering at Peter's choice."

"Yes, I see Dawtie was in one of her flighty, undisciplined moods. But Dr. Weston told me the other day that her nerves are really in a bad state. That is why he wants her to go to Cromer. Her maid told him that she often cries half the night. You see she has never quite recovered the shock. So don't you think we ought to be patient with her?"

"Oh yes, I forgot," in a distressed tone. "But I did not mean to be unkind, Sir Heber."

"You are never unkind," and he spoke with feeling, "and I am very grateful to you for the way you have borne with her all these weeks. Now if you will only try to put up with her tiresome little ways for the next ten days. Miss Burke's name need not be mentioned between you, and very likely she will be Mrs. Peter Holt before Dawtie returns to Godstone."

This statement, though extremely probable, made Vera look rather blank. But Sir Heber only smiled at her; he had a charming smile.

"I am sure you are far too fond of your brother not to wish him happiness; and when two sensible people love each other it is better for them to be married as soon as possible. Long engagements, in my opinion, are

good for neither man nor woman. Now to-morrow I shall ride over to the Red House to congratulate your brother, but I shall not ask Damaris to call at Wayside. I shall wait until you return home, and then I shall ask you to give me an introduction to Miss Burke as your future sister-in-law, and I will promise to make myself exceedingly pleasant to her, and——but that will keep."

"Oh no, do tell me, Sir Heber. You have been so kind, and have done me so much good;" and Vera looked at him very sweetly. He had always been her friend from the first. She could tell him all her little troubles and feel assured of his sympathy, and his kindness and consideration had made her visits to Godstone very pleasant. "Do please tell me what it was you intended to say."

"What I intended not to say, you mean. No, on second thoughts, I will reserve the rest of my sentence. I have promised Damaris that I will look after Bear. So you will probably see me at the Red House two or three times a week, unless your manner tells me that I am a nuisance. In that case I will certainly make myself scarce."

"I am quite sure my manner will never tell you that." But Vera blushed as she spoke, for Sir Heber was looking at her a little strangely, as though there was something he wanted to say, and yet thought it wiser to keep silence, though it was pain and grief to him to do so.

"I hope not," was all his reply. "Now, if you are feeling better we might go up and look after Bear." But Vera excused herself rather shyly. She wanted to write a note to Peter, she said. But as she sat at her open window her paper lay blank before her. For she was

wondering why Sir Heber had looked at her so oddly, and why he had not finished his sentence.

"I think he was nicer than ever to-day," thought the girl, as she at last took up the pen and wrote "My dear old Peter" in her pretty girlish handwriting.

Chapter XXXIV

VERA IS FIRST SPEAKER

Language was given to us that we might say pleasant things to each other.—BONER.

Wear velvet inside you and try to give pleasure every hour of the day.—JOUBERT.

A FEW days after this exciting episode at the Red House, some legal business connected with one of his farms summoned Mr. Ashton to London; and as he was likely to be detained for two or three weeks, he decided to take Alix with him.

Dr. Weston thought the change would do her good. She was evidently making strong efforts to maintain outward cheerfulness, and to conceal from her father the deep, underlying sadness that preyed upon her, but she was losing flesh visibly, and Dr. Weston told Mr. Ashton her recuperative powers were not equal to her will.

"She wants rousing and taking out of herself; but one must be careful not to overtax her strength." And then he suggested that they should consult an old friend of his who was rather a leading authority in such cases.

"Alison is a good, all-round man, and you can rely on his opinion," he said to the Squire. "I have reason to know that he will not take his holiday until next month, as his wife's condition is keeping him in town."

"Then you are not satisfied with Alix, Doctor?"

"Well, not exactly—though I see no need for anxiety. She is not a good subject for this sort of shock; it has

taken too much out of her. She broods over her troubles, and there is a lack of vitality about her. Yes, take her with you by all means." And Mr. Ashton decided to act on his old friend's advice. He had a cousin living in a pleasant house at Princes Gate. In their youthful days Eleanor Paget had been like a sister to him, and since her marriage there had been much friendly intercourse between the Garth and No. 76 Princes Gate.

There was only one daughter, who had married two years before and lived in a palatial flat at Albert Court. Dollie Brandreth was a lively little person, but Alix had always been fond of her, and she had written very kindly to Alix in her trouble.

The previous year a great sorrow had come to the Pagets. Their only surviving son had fallen a victim to Indian fever. He had just obtained his captaincy, and had recently been disabled by a polo accident, and a sharp attack of fever did the rest.

The parents had recovered from the first shock of their grief; but Mrs. Paget's health had suffered, and it was arranged that they were to winter in Egypt. Dollie Brandreth and her husband would accompany them.

Mr. Ashton knew that the quiet home atmosphere of his cousin's house would suit Alix better than an hotel, and he gratefully accepted the Pagets' invitation to stay at Princes Gate. Alix was very much attached to her cousin Eleanor, and community of trouble would draw them more together.

"My cousin is a very healthy-minded woman," he said to Ranee when he was discussing their plans with her. "She has borne the shock of Fred's death wonderfully, though it has somewhat aged her. She is a kind-hearted, motherly creature, and Alix will be safe with her; and

then Dollie will be running in and out—the Albert Court flats are close by."

Ranee listened with much interest to all this, and approved of everything; it was a splendid idea, she said. And of course Dr. Weston was right, and a little change would do Alix a world of good.

Ranee herself was bubbling over with satisfaction. During their absence she was to be at the Red House for three weeks. Mr. Ashton once heard her singing "Home, Sweet Home" as she wandered down the orchard paths in the early morning, and smiled rather gravely.

"What a child she is," he thought; "she idolizes that dingy old house in St. Andrew's Street. And yet I like her all the better for it. If only the Garth were as dear to Alix! But there, one might as well compare morning and twilight, their natures are so dissimilar. I shall miss Hebe," he went on; and then he told himself that it would be very pleasant to have her bright face to welcome them on their return.

Ranee had some difficulty in controlling her high spirits. She wanted to laugh, to sing, to talk nonsense, to do a hundred absurd things, and all because she and Vera and Sallie would be together morning, noon, and night for three whole weeks. And Peter! "Oh, well," with a tinge of gravity, "Hannah must come to them as much as possible; she really could not spare Peter more than two evenings a week. I know Hannah will be nice about it," she went on; "she will understand how much I want him. And then there is Bear; and Sir Heber will be coming over continually. Oh, dear, what a crowd we shall be! The more the merrier, Peter will say. Peter is so dreadfully sociable."

Mr. Ashton said a few words to the girl the evening

before he and Alix were to go up to town. He told her how glad he was that she had consented to remain at the Garth, and to accept his conditions. "You have shown your good sense, and I am very much obliged to you; if you had refused you would have placed me in a very awkward position."

Ranee murmured something inaudible, for she was very much taken aback by this. Then her love of truth obliged her to say, "I wanted to refuse, only Vera and Peter would not let me."

"That would have been a pity, for it would have spoiled a most desirable arrangement." Mr. Ashton spoke rather stiffly.

"Oh, I could not leave Alix," she returned, colouring a little under this implied rebuke; "and I have been so happy at the Garth—though I do love home as dearly as ever;" and here there was a little break in Ranee's voice. "I seem torn in two." Then Mr. Ashton smiled.

"I quite understand," he said kindly; "your love for your own home does you credit; such a good sister should make a loyal friend. I shall be glad if you regard us as worthy of your friendship."

"Who?—I?" colouring still more. "Oh, Mr. Ashton, what can you mean? when you and Alix have been so good to me; and now," faltering over her words, "you are treating me so generously."

"Come, that sounds better," he returned encouragingly. "My dear child, other people have their pride as well as you. You did not like the idea of accepting an allowance, but nothing on earth would have induced me to keep you at the Garth under other conditions. I am a business man, Miss Holt; and, as you know, your brother agreed with me."

"Oh yes, and Peter called me a goose; he thought me a proud, stuck-up little piece of goods, and I daresay he was right."

"You must not expect me to endorse that; I only think you a litttle impracticable. Now we need not talk any more about it. You will find the plan works excellently; on quarter days you will have your cheque when Alix has hers, in fact it will be as though I had two daughters." Roger Ashton said this with such fatherly kindness in his manner, such respect and consideration for the girl's feelings, that Ranee felt a thrill of gratitude.

"Oh, thank you," she said simply; "indeed I will do my best to earn it." And then he held out his hand without speaking, and they went back to the house, where Alix was waiting for them.

When Ranee went home the next day she found Bear making friends with Waif in the garden under Sallie's supervision.

"So you have come home too, Miss Ray!" she exclaimed joyously. "Vera brought me and Nurse back with her yesterday. Uncle Heber and Gavin did not like saying good-bye, but Uncle Heber is coming tomorrow when he has seen mother off, and Gavin is coming every day. And let me tell you a secret"—and here Bear whispered in Ranee's ear—"he is going to bring Vera such beautiful flowers and fruit, Uncle Heber and I settled that"; and Bear pursed up her lips and nodded her head very mysteriously.

"Do you think you will be happy here, dear?"

"I should just think so!" in a tone of rapture. "Fancy being with my dear Vera and Sallie and Dr. Holt all day long; and now you have come, Miss Ray, it will be ever so much nicer. It is just like a dear funny

little cubby-house after our big house; but that makes it all the nicer," explained Bear politely. "Carson does not like it as much as I do, but she says it does very well for a change." But here Ranee thought it advisable to change the subject.

When Bear had gone to bed the three sisters sat in the garden and had a long, delightful talk. Peter had been called out to a case, and would not be back until a late supper, but they decided to wait for him.

There was so much to say, so many subjects to start, such an unusually full budget, as Ranee remarked, that they were a litttle mixed at first; for everybody wanted to speak, so there were no listeners—until Ranee started one of her original ideas.

"Just hush for a moment, please; we can't hear each other speak if we gabble all together like a flock of excited geese. Look here, I am going to fold three slips of paper, and on one I shall pencil "First come, first served," and whoever draws that shall be the first speaker," and to this they laughingly agreed; but Ranee was a trifle disappointed when Vera drew the lucky slip. But Vera cleared her throat like a vigorous little chanticleer who means to crow his loudest. "For I really have so much to say, girls," she explained, "that I hardly know where to begin."

"Begin at the end, then," suggested Ranee, "and make a brief summary of the subject." But Vera said the interruption was not fair, and she did not want any advice, as she liked to talk in her own way; nevertheless she acted on it.

"Now where do you think I was on Tuesday? I have not told Sallie yet, I was so busy getting the house in order, and I begged Peter to keep it to himself." But

as no one ventured a guess, both Ranee and Sallie being on their best behaviour, she continued triumphantly, "I was at Wayside."

This piece of news at once made a sensation.

"Sir Heber drove me there in his mail phaeton, and Bear came too."

"Oh, Vera, what a sly little fox you are!" But Ranee chuckled. "Did Mrs. Lugard go with you?"

"No, of course not. There, what is the good of beginning at the end when one has to work back to the beginning! But I must tell you how it came about or you will never understand;" and Vera settled to her work with much enjoyment.

"You must know, Ray, that Damaris behaved very badly when she heard of Peter's engagement; she said disagreeable things about Hannah and made me so unhappy. I don't think I could have stayed at Godstone, only Sir Heber was so nice about it, and that helped me to bear it.

"He was as sympathetic as possible, and seemed so full of interest; and he was not a bit shocked, as I expected him to be, and said Peter was a sensible man, and he seemed quite to like Hannah. And then he begged me to put up with Damaris, because Dr. Weston had said her nerves were unhinged, and very likely she could not help saying disagreeable things. And of course I promised him to do my best, but really Damaris was too trying;" and Vera sighed at the recollection.

"Of course I had made up my mind not to mention either Peter's or Hannah's name as long as I remained at Godstone, but do you suppose that did any good? At meal-times or when Sir Heber was in the room she would make little jokes and horrid little innuendoes,

which made me long to slap her. Once she said before the servants—Gavin was in the room, too, he was helping Bear—that people said marriages were made in heaven, but she hardly thought Abbey-Thorpe matches could be called celestial; they rather reminded her of the wholesale weddings in Manchester in Whit-week, when the couples got mixed and the clerk said they must sort themselves; but she rather thought that some folks were wrongly sorted. Oh, how hot I got! Gavin was trying not to laugh; but when he had gone out of the room Sir Heber said, so drily, 'That he did not wonder that she spoke so feelingly about marriages after that unlucky affair in Paris. Two people were wrongly sorted there," he observed sternly; and that silenced Damaris, for she can't bear the least allusion to poor Captain Lugard."

"I hope that cured her."

"Oh dear no; she was as trying as ever when we were alone, but she never ventured to make these speeches again before her brother. Really, I felt as though I almost disliked her; and yet Dawtie can be so nice when she likes."

"She is just a horrid, deceitful little cat," observed Ranee angrily, but Vera shook her head.

"I am very sorry for her, though she does lead us all a life. Well, to go on with my story, it was such a relief when on Tuesday morning Damaris announced her intention of going up to town for the day, and taking Nicholls with her. At any other time she would have asked me to go, but I expect she meant to punish me for taking Peter's part; she has not been really nice to me since I told her about the engagement; as though it were my fault," continued Vera, with a little laugh.

"Oh, who cares what the woman called Damaris thinks!" exclaimed Ranee impatiently. "Fire away, Vera; I want to get to Wayside, and I find the summary unusually long."

"Well, when Dawtie had gone out of the room, Sir Heber asked me what I should like to do; and he proposed that I should drive with him in his mail phaeton, and that Bear should go too. I told him that I should enjoy it of all things, but that I felt I must take advantage of Damaris's absence to go over to Wayside, for I knew that I had treated Hannah very badly, not even having sent her a note. And then he said at once that he would drive me there and then go on to the town, as he had some business that he would be glad to do, and he would take Bear with him.

"But he reckoned without his host there, for directly Bear saw the garden and the flowers in the porch she insisted on coming with me. And while Hinton and I were helping her, Hannah, who had seen us from the window, came down to the gate, looking so nice and bright; and we kissed each other in the road, and there was no awkwardness at all. She said, 'How nice of you to come and see me,' and then she asked Sir Heber if he would not come in too; but he told her in such a pleasant, friendly manner that that would spoil sport, and that he would only be in the way; that he had some business in the town; but that if she would be good enough to give him a cup of tea, he would be free in an hour's time; and I could see Hannah was so pleased.

"He is a dear man," observed Ranee. "Well, did you have a nice talk, Vera?"

"Well, you see, dear, Bear was there, and she is

a very interrupting little person; not that it really mattered, for I said all I wanted, and Hannah was really very sweet and met me half-way. But I don't think she will ever be as fond of me as she is of you, Ranee; she brightened up so when she mentioned your name."

Ranee smiled, but was too truthful to deny this. She knew Hannah Burke had cared for her from the first.

"It really was a delightful afternoon," went on Vera. "Sir Heber did so enjoy his tea, and he admired the room. And Hannah showed him some old curiosities, and he called it the Wallace Collection, and told her that she ought to be proud of her possessions. And then to please Bear we went into the garden. And Hannah let the child gather as many flowers as she liked. We were all quite sorry when the visit was over, but the drive back was delicious."

"Did Sir Heber say what he thought of Hannah?" asked Ranee.

"No, he had told me that before; but I could see he liked her. 'I expect you are feeling all the happier, Miss Holt,' he said, as soon as Bear would let him speak; 'when we make others happy, we deserve to be happy ourselves.' And a few minutes later he remarked, 'I think your brother is to be envied. I certainly fully endorse all I said about Miss Burke the other day.' I longed for him to say more, but you see Hinton was behind and could hear every word—Sir Heber knew that."

"Oh, I am so glad, so very glad you went, Vera."

"Oh, so am I, though our little jaunt ended rather flatly. For, to our surprise, Damaris returned by an earlier train than we expected, and was just going up-

stairs to take off her hat when we drove up. She seemed rather astonished when she saw the mail phaeton.

"Have you been taking Vera for a drive?" she asked in her sharp way, but I did not think she looked overpleased. You see the Holts were rather in disgrace, and she did not like her brother to show me attention. Then Sir Heber took the bull by the horns boldly; for, as he said afterwards, 'It is no good trying to put Damaris off the scent; she is a true daughter of Eve, and for curiosity in other people's business I would back her against a hundred women; she would never have rested until she knew every inch of the ground we had been over.' But at the moment I was a little surprised to hear him say, 'I drove Miss Holt to Wayside, as she wished to pay her respects to her future sister-in-law, and then I went on to do my own business. Then I joined them there, and Miss Burke gave us a famous tea. What a jolly little place it is! I hope Dr. Holt will manage to live in it." But Damaris would not hear any more; she gave us a scathing look and swept upstairs like a little tragedy queen.

She was in her tantrums the rest of the evening, and would hardly speak to either of us. I don't believe she has forgiven me yet. She is so angry because she thinks it is all my fault that Sir Heber went to Wayside."

"Why, there is Peter!" exclaimed Sallie, jumping up in a hurry. "It must be later than we thought." And this created a diversion. The lord and master of the establishment must be fed, that was the first duty of woman. "I must fly, Ray," whispered Vera in an agonised voice, "for I have forgotten to mix the salad."

Chapter XXXV

"SIR ORACLE HAS SPOKEN"

I commend your caution . . . it is dangerous to be too positive on any subject.—*Surgeon's Daughter.*

RANEE enjoyed her three weeks intensely: morning, noon, and night she rioted deliciously in her feast of good things. Judith, as she washed her dishes, would smile as she heard her young ladies' tongues clacking busily over their work. There were shopping expeditions and new evening blouses to make, and sometimes the three girls and Bear would have tea at Wayside or at Wynyards. "We must come in a family heap, or we won't come at all," Ranee would say; and Hannah and Margaret Weston were too glad to have them on any terms. But they liked the evenings best when Peter remained quietly at home with them, and they were just the old quartette.

Peter behaved very well on the whole. He contented himself with spending every other evening at Wayside—and Hannah always came to them on Sunday afternoons—and the alternate evenings he devoted himself to his sisters. Unless, as sometimes happened, there was some little expedition planned, and then they insisted that Hannah should accompany them.

Mr. Ashton had given orders that the carriages should be at their disposal three times a week, the horses would need exercise; and on these occasions they would drive

to some distant farmhouse or quaint little village inn and have tea there. Business was rather slack with Peter just then, and he was generally able to accompany them, and if the carriage were full he cycled after them. These little expeditions were greatly enjoyed by the sisterhood. They initiated Hannah into the mysteries of roadside cribbage, and more than once a plodding wayfarer would be puzzled by a clear young voice exclaiming, "Cat looking out of the window—our side has won, Sallie." And Hodges would shoulder his scythe and march on stolidly, wondering at the odd ways of gentlefolk.

Peter would be very confidential with his sisters as they walked four abreast up and down the little lawn in the starlight, oblivious of dews and damp, and followed by a bored but faithful Waif. Perhaps he was a little vague at times, and implied and hinted at sundry possibilities in the future; but they understood him quite well.

One thing he told them plainly: that he did not intend to be married until the spring or early summer. He and Hannah agreed that it would be better to wait a little, but it was quite certain that their future home would be at Wayside. Hannah loved it, and the Red House could not possibly hold them all.

"You girls and Judith can stay on there, you know," explained Peter blandly. "You see," clearing his voice, "Hannah has a nice little income of her own, and the house is hers, and I shall be able to do you well, I expect, if——" But here Peter hummed and hawed and became mysterious again.

He thought it very probable, from something Dr. Weston had said—— But perhaps it would be as well to

keep that dark for the present; and indeed he had no right to do more than surmise when Dr. Weston had only dropped a hint. The poor old man was apprehensive that his gout would give him trouble again. Dr. Alison had recommended him to undergo a course of treatment at Bath, and in that case Peter would have charge of the practice for six weeks or two months. "As far as I can see, I shall have plenty of work to keep me warm in the winter," he finished cheerfully.

"And you think," suggested Ranee eagerly, "that Dr. Weston——" But she got no further in her sentence, for Peter was down on her at once.

"Yes, I think, and you think, and every one with an ounce of sense in their heads thinks that it is better to hold one's tongue until things are settled. There is many a slip between the cup and the lip, and there is no good counting your eggs until you have them in your basket. I am putting it coarsely, perhaps, but I would rather not attach importance to gouty reflections. A sick man thinks he will never be fit for his day's work again, but when he is better he is as ready as ever to put on the gloves again."

"You mean that Bath may do Dr. Weston so much good that he may not need to take a partner?" And though Peter frowned at this plain speaking, he endorsed it.

'Anyhow, Hannah thinks it will be better to wait," he went on; "and under any circumstances I shall be far too busy to think of a honeymoon." But Peter's voice softened as he spoke. "I want to take Hannah abroad; she has never seen anything, and I know how much she would enjoy it. So I have to put by a few pennies for that. Now the question that is agitating

us at present is this, and we talk about it for hours: There are certain additions to Wayside to be made before it will be fit for a doctor's house, and we are hesitating whether it shall be done now."

"Oh yes!" exclaimed Ranee; "Hannah was talking to us about it yesterday. She wants the work to be begun at once, and Vera and I told her that she was quite right."

"But it will be so uncomfortable for her all the winter," objected Peter.

"I don't believe Hannah will mind it one bit," returned Vera. "She said that she would quite enjoy watching the workmen." But Ranee interrupted her.

"What a pity you have Bear for the winter! Hannah could have stayed at the Red House."

But Vera thought this would not quite do. But anyhow it was no good thinking of it. She had undertaken the responsibility of Bear, and she was perfectly happy with them; and in her opinion Hannah could make herself comfortable, as the living rooms would be untouched. And then Peter explained the nature of the alterations to them. He and Hannah had already consulted an architect.

The porch entrance was to be untouched, but the hall and kitchen were to be enlarged and several new rooms built—a dining-room and study for Peter, and a waiting-room for patients, with a small laboratory leading out of it; and two good bedrooms and bathroom and dressing-room above.

"But it will cost a lot of money, Peter!" exclaimed Vera, rather aghast at such extravagance.

"Hannah says it will be best to make a good thing of it while we are about it, and she has a nice little sum

lying at the bank. It is not a bad investment if you look at it from a business point of view, for if we cannot afford to live in it ourselves we could let or sell it. Forbes means to carry out the work so thoroughly that the new wing will be an improvement. I wish Hannah could have a conservatory, because she is so fond of flowers, but I cannot induce her to indulge in such a luxury. And, after all, I have no right to press it, as she is paying for the whole thing."

There was silence for a moment. The girls were realising for the first time that Hannah Burke was a woman of means, and that perhaps Peter had not done so badly for himself in marrying her. Anyhow, he would have a lovely home. But Peter, unconscious of their thoughts, proceeded with this entrancing scheme.

"There is no room for stables, of course—if I ever get rich enough to keep my carriage—but Forbes gave us a splendid idea. He says that Miss Margrave has had losses lately, and there is a likelihood of her getting rid of her horses, and that in this case she would probably be glad to let her stables and coach-houses, with the rooms over them. Chesterton is only six or seven doors from Wayside."

"But you are not likely to have your carriage, Peter."

"No, Sallie Lunn—so we need not bother our heads about stables." And then Vera asked if they would leave the dear old room with the ingle-nook unchanged; and Peter said, "Yes, of course," quite vehemently, and that the old dining-room, a very cosy but small apartment, was to be turned into a morning-room for Hannah."

"Oh, we have threshed it all out, and it will be simply perfect—perfect," and Peter's voice was full of satisfaction; and if they could have seen his face—which

they could not—the blue light of his eyes would have fairly dazzled them; for Peter was honestly and tremendously happy, and made no attempt to hide that he considered himself a very fortunate man.

Peter made them come indoors after that. Judith had lighted the lamp, and the room looked very cosy; and as they were all too wide-awake and excited to go to their little beds, they formed their usual heap and went on with their subject.

"You will have to keep another servant, Peter," observed Vera in her serious way; "Jane could never manage alone in a larger house. Why do you not have Judith as well? Hannah likes her so much; she is always saying what a treasure she must be. And then there is Ebenezer."

"Oh, I should take Ebenezer, of course; but I must leave Judith for you girls;" for Peter was always thoughtful for his sisters' comfort.

Then Ranee suddenly said, "Oh dear, shall we tell him, Vera?" And Sallie clapped her hands and said, "Of course we must tell him." And then Ranee launched into their grand scheme. "It is the Story of a Flat," she began, "and it has three charming heroines, and it is to be brought out as a serial, and here beginneth the first chapter." And then she went on.

Peter was intesely amused—more than once he threw back his head and burst into a peal of boyish laughter—but he was touched all the same by the sisterly self-abnegation that was expressed in it. "And this is all your own idea, little 'un?" as Ranee paused.

"Yes," she returned proudly, "I evolved it out of my inner consciousness; but Vera and Sallie approved. You see, we thought it our duty to launch Sallie into

her art life." But Ranee spoke without her usual spirit and enthusiasm. Her pet scheme as she unfolded it seemed a little flat, stale, and unprofitable. There was a musty flavour about it, as though it had been laid up too long on a shelf. "Our flat" hardly seemed the desirable abode that her imagination had depicted. It suddenly struck her that she and Vera would find it confined and dull, and that even sisterly companionship would not make the view of chimney-pots delightful. Would not their soul sicken and hanker for the flesh-pots of Egypt? Would not Vera yearn for the avenues and wide lawns and spacious rooms at Godstone Park? And how about "the haunt of ancient peace," and the orchard paths in the early morning, and the Dame's Room with its quaint, well-ordered daintiness? Ranee gave an involuntary shiver as these thoughts passed through her mind.

"We were thinking most of Sallie," observed Vera placidly.

"Oh yes, my dear, but I could not think of such a thing for a moment," returned Peter, becoming all at once very resolute and serious. "You three girls in a poky, cheap little flat, cooking your own meals, and Vera being maid-of-all-work!" And here Peter stole a furtive glance at the pretty face beside him. "Why, the idea is absurd! Hannah would refuse to marry me under such conditions. No, Ra, you are a good little soul and you mean well, but I am not going to allow my sisters to kick off the traces in this ridiculous fashion. Sallie and you are still minors, and under my guardianship, and I shall keep you both safe. Seriously, girls, I should much prefer your remaining at the Red House, at least for the present. Later on, when things are more settled, we will see about Sallie's art education and the

flat; but in that case I shall insist on Judith going too." And as Peter delivered himself of this autocratic speech, Ranee gave a little shrug of her shoulders.

"Sir Oracle has spoken, Vera."

"Yes, and Sir Oracle is getting sleepy, Ra. Now go to bed, girls, and don't chatter any more. I am going to turn the lamp out, so one, two, three, and away." Then with little shrieks of dismay the girls fled up the staircase, for they knew the demon of mischief had taken possession of their brother, and that a whooping wild Indian of a Peter would pursue them and catch the hindmost; and they had all forgotten Bear, and were dreadfully ashamed of themselves when they heard a frightened voice calling for Carson. Vera had to go in and soothe her.

"That comes of having other people's brats in one's house," growled Peter, as he went downstairs to shut up. But as he locked and bolted the doors there was a broad grin on his face. "Bless their little hearts," he said to himself—"maids-of-all-work in a flat, eh? Peter, my boy, we know a thing or two better than that, and we will keep the blessed infants under our eye at present." And here Peter winked at Waif, which so excited that intelligent animal that he gave a sharp and delighted bark, and was requested by his master to shut up; and before long there was peace, and the household at the Red House slept tranquilly.

Ranee did not see much of Sir Heber during her holiday. A few days after her arrival he was summoned to Tenby; an old college friend of his was ill. He came to say good-bye, but was evidently in a great hurry, and Ranee, who was spending the morning at Wynyards, missed him. She fancied Vera looked a trifle dull for

the rest of the afternoon. Gavin paid daily visits, and was a great help in amusing Bear. He seldom came empty-handed. Flowers, fruit, vegetables, and game were brought for the young ladies, with Sir Heber's compliments. Vera never let any one but herself touch those flowers. Now and then Ranee surprised her gazing at them rather pensively, but she purposely took no notice. Ranee would not have whispered the faintest hint into the ear of her dearest and best. She would have deemed it profanation. If such a wonderful thing should ever happen, and their sweet Vera should find favour in the eyes of the master of Godstone Park, she would rejoice with all her heart. Now and then she wondered if Peter guessed. He took a good deal of notice of Vera just then and seemed to study her wishes more than ever. But with all his frankness, Peter could be like a closed book when he liked, and he kept his thoughts to himself.

On Michaelmas Day Ranee received a friendly little note from Mr. Ashton, with a cheque enclosed. Ranee's cheeks were very pink, and she looked extremely shy, as she took it to Peter and begged him to cash it. But he only gave her a reassuring smile. "You must buy something pretty for yourself, Ra," he said kindly.

They had a grand shopping expedition the next day, and Ranee bought all manner of beautiful and useful things for herself and Vera and Sallie, and she would not listen to any prudent advice, for the demon of extravagance had entered her heart and she was perfectly reckless. "Why should I save?" she said to Vera; "there will be more coming at Christmas, and I shall have sufficient money of my own for current expenses. I am going to buy those handkerchiefs for Peter, and a

frilled apron for Judith." And Ranee looked quite fierce and defiant as she entered the shop.

Evil communications corrupt good manners, and, grievous to say, Ranee's recklessness infected Vera, and she actually proposed that their treasured fund should be expended on new table-linen. But Ranee flatly refused to accede to this.

"I have a much better idea than that," she said in her decided way. "It shall be used for Peter's wedding-present—every penny of it."

"Oh, Ray, what a splendid idea! But what shall we buy?"

"I was thinking a new bicycle will be the most useful thing, and we have all that money, Vera." And then Sallie was hastily bidden to the council, and gave her vote for the bicycle at once. "Peter wanted one with the latest improvements," Sallie remarked; "he was always grumbling at his old one, and Ebenezer could use it." And then the resolution was carried unanimously.

This little argument had taken place on Ranee's last evening, while they were waiting for Peter. The next morning the carriage was coming for her, and later on in the day it was to go to Abbey-Thorpe station for the Squire and Alix.

Chapter XXXVI

A STARTLING PROPOSITION

When the song's gone out of your life, you can't start another while it's a-ringing in your ears; it's best to have a bit of silence, and out o' that maybe a psalm 'll come by and by.—EDWARD GARRETT.

"GOOD-BYE, you dear people; I have never had such a delightful holiday in my life, and I only wish I could have it all over again," were Ranee's parting words, as she distributed indiscriminate hugs, beginning with Bear and ending with Peter. And then as she drove off, and the little circle of home faces vanished from her view, she said resolutely to herself, "Buck up, little 'un"—a piece of salutary advice bestowed upon her by Peter.

"Oh dear, oh dear," groaned Ranee, "what a queer old jumble life is—a perfect tangle of contradiction. Here I shall be missing those blessed girlies every hour of the day, and yet it will be nice to get back to Alix and the Garth again." And Ranee gave herself a little shake, as though she were impatient of her own complex mood.

Her pulses quickened a little as the carriage rolled through the gates, and the beautiful old house stood out grandly in the October sunshine. It was pleasant to receive Walton's respectful greetings, and Flossie's rapturous welcome. And then there was Mrs. Binney to interview. And, finally, she went up to the Dame's Room, followed by rosy-cheeked Emma, the under-

housemaid, who was considered her special attendant, to help her unpack before luncheon.

"Oh, how beautiful it all is," she sighed inwardly. But she would not confess even to herself that comparison with the dingy rooms at the Red House added to the effect and made it more beautiful than ever to her eyes.

"I don't think I ever could love any house as I do this," she thought, as she sat idly on the window-seat, looking out on the orchards.

After luncheon Ranee rambled about the grounds and revisited all her favourite haunts; and to her own surprise she was not at all dull. Vera and Sallie would come over in a day or two, and Peter had promised to look in very soon. So, after all, it was a very bright face that welcomed the travellers when they drove up. Ranee never guessed what a charming picture she made as she stood under the old porch with Flossie beside her. The afternoon sunshine lighted up the pretty little brown head and grey dress; the spray of autumn leaves and crimson roses gave a finishing touch. To Mr. Ashton she looked more like Hebe than ever.

"Oh, Alix dear, how tired you are!" she exclaimed, as the girl's wistful, affectionate glance met hers. The slight figure in its deep mourning, the sweet pale face, seemed more pathetic than ever in Ranee's eyes. She wondered if the change had really done her good, or if it were the return home that was oppressing her and making her look so sad.

"Yes, she is very tired," observed Mr. Ashton; "I think we shall both be glad of a cup of tea." And then they went into the drawing-room, and Alix took off her hat and smoothed her fair hair, and tried to talk cheerfully as she caressed Flossie. But Ranee could see her

lip quivered now and then, as though the sight of the old environment woke up the old pain.

Ranee chattered away in her sprightly fashion as she poured out tea and waited on them. She would not let herself be silent for a moment; and more than once Mr. Ashton's grave face relaxed into a smile as he listened to her. Yes, it was pleasant, he thought, to have this bright young creature to welcome them. In one sense it was a better home-coming than usual. And then he looked at Alix, and his face clouded again; but the next moment he suggested gently that she should go to her room and rest before dinner.

Alix accepted the advice gratefully, and the two girls went off together. Lawson was in the anteroom unpacking the boxes, so Ranee proposed that Alix should rest on the couch in the Dame's Room. "You will be quieter," she observed; "it would only fidget you to have Lawson coming in and out." And Alix assented to this. But as she made her comfortable Ranee said, rather resentfully, "You really ought not to be so tired, Allie; it is only a short journey, and it is such a cool day."

"Oh, I am always tired now," returned Alix, with a faint smile at Ranee's petulance. "I am sorry if I disappoint you, dear; I am afraid father is disappointed too. You see I always shall be a failure."

"I don't believe you are one little bit better, Alix," returned her friend; "and you are thinner—yes, I am sure you are thinner." For her quick eyes had noticed during tea that the heavy wedding ring turned loosely on her finger, and the keeper was too large also.

Alix did not contradict this. What was the use of ex-

plaining away facts? But she seemed unwilling to be questioned about her health.

"I think I have lost flesh a little," she said reluctantly. "I never expected London would do me much good, and I am glad to be home again; it is so quiet and peaceful here."

"But I thought you were so glad to be with Mrs. Paget?"

"So I was. Cousin Eleanor was so kind, and I loved to talk to her; and I think we did each other good. She feels poor Fred's death so dreadfully, and, you see, we could enter into each other's sorrow. I could tell her things that I could not mention to any other human being, and she always seemed to understand; and she did not think me wicked because I miss my darling Nicholas more every day."

"Oh, Alix, I hoped that you would have felt a little better by this time;" and Ranee's voice was rather reproachful.

One of Alix's gentle, wistful glances answered this. "Cousin Eleanor knows I cannot help it," she said, after a minute's silence. "We were talking about that only yesterday. I was telling her that father hated me to wear such deep mourning; that he was quite impatient about it, and said it was heathenish and unreasonable; that I had never lived a day with my husband, and that he thought under the circumstances that I need not have shrouded myself in crape; that I was nursing my grief. Oh dear, I cannot remember all he said, but it made me so unhappy, and Cousin Eleanor was so dear about it."

"Tell me what she said, Alix."

"Oh, she quite understood it was my one comfort;

and she promised that she would have a little talk with father, and ask him to be patient with me.

"'Men very often have peculiar feelings about mourning,' she went on. 'My own dear husband is quite unreasonable on that point too. I lightened my mourning far sooner than I wished, that I might not depress him, and he was quite grateful to me. You see,' and here she hesitated a moment, 'even in sorrow one must not be selfish; and there are no circumstances, Alix, that will justify us in want of consideration for other people's feelings. And, after all, what does it matter, if we only wear our crape inwardly.'"

"Oh, what a sensible woman Mrs. Paget must be!" Ranee remarked.

"She is a dear!" and Alix spoke with momentary animation. "She is one of the most unselfish women I ever knew. She exerts herself to do things, and she interests herself in all her husband's pursuits, and never allows herself to indulge in sad memories. But she says, and I know it is true, that she will mourn for her boy all her life. They were so much to each other, and he was such a sweet-natured fellow. And, oh, I do feel so sorry for her."

"And she is sorry for you too?"

"Yes, indeed; and she says she is all the more sorry for me because she sees that my lack of strength adds to my trouble. 'Your mind and body react on each other,' she observed. 'When you are stronger you will take a more robust view of things, and you won't let yourself lie in the dust. Now, don't trouble your poor little head,' she went on, 'about collars and cuffs and crape and rubbish of that kind. I shall tell Mr. Ashton that he must leave you severely alone for the present;

and in other matters you must be obedient and submissive.'"

"In other matters? I don't quite understand, Alix."

"No dear, I daresay not, but we will talk about that another time, for I am tired now. By the bye, Ranee, I quite forgot father asked me to send you down as soon as I could spare you, as there was something he wanted to say to you. You might as well go to him now, the dressing-bell will not ring for another three-quarters of an hour."

"Very well." But as Ranee knocked at the study door she wondered what he could have to say to her. She was evidently expected, for he opened it at once. His felt hat was in his hand.

"Shall we go out to the 'Seven Sisters'?" he said quietly; "it is a pity to spend this lovely evening indoors." And as Ranee gladly agreed to this, they walked down the pleasant orchard paths together, pausing every now and then to admire some late apple tree still laden with ruddy and golden fruit. Then there was the pear-tree walk, which was not in its beauty just then, but was still charming, and the old medlar tree to visit, and several other little nooks and corners that Ranee had discovered in the course of her wanderings; but at last they reached the bench under the "Seven Sisters," and then Mr. Ashton became serious all at once.

"What do you think of Alix?" he asked abruptly.

"I don't think I can judge very well this afternoon," returned Ranee reluctantly; "she is very tired, but it seems to me that she is a little thinner."

"That is exactly what Dr. Alison said," he replied rather moodily, "that she is losing flesh. I daresay Alix told you that I wanted to speak to you, and so I do.

Dr. Alison advised me to take her to Cannes for the winter. He thinks it would be a risk for her to remain here; he has discovered a trace of lung mischief, which is latent at present, but if she took cold he would not answer for the consequences."

Ranee uttered a low exclamation; she was rather startled at this.

"I am convinced in my own mind from something Dr. Weston said that he shares this opinion. I shall have a talk with him to-morrow before I definitely settle plans. Dr. Alison would like us to start before the end of the month. Unfortunately the Pagets have arranged to go to Egypt, and the Brandreths are going with them, or my cousin, Mrs. Paget, would willingly have accompanied us to Cannes. I regret this very much, and so does Alix."

"Oh, what a pity! Alix is so fond of Mrs. Paget."

"Yes," with a sigh, "and my cousin's society would have been a great boon to us; but Dollie Brandreth has set her heart on Egypt. Now I want to know, Miss Holt, if you will cast in your lot with us. Alix wants you and so do I, and as you have told me that you have never been abroad——" and here he paused and looked at her rather wistfully. Ranee fairly gasped; such a proposition almost took her breath away.

"You once told me that you had never seen a mountain covered with snow," he went on. "When Alix is stronger we might go to Monte Carlo and Nice; but it is no use making pleasant plans beforehand." Then Ranee's eyes began to sparkle.

"Oh," she said, and there was a touch of awe in her voice, "I never thought that such a thing could come to me—mountains and the sea and the sunshine, and all

those wonderful flowers! Oh, I know; Margaret has been to all those places, and she told me; and, oh, how I envied her!"

"Then I may take your consent as granted?" he said, smiling at her, for Ranee was so deliciously naïve in her enthusiasm. "Alix was certain you would not refuse; she never had a doubt about it."

"I don't see how one could refuse anything so good and tempting," returned Ranee. "Oh, how pleased Peter will be! He used to say sometimes when he was a little bit down that it was such a pity that we girls should not see anything of the world. 'You will just get into a groove and insular and narrow.' We used to be so vexed when he said that. Oh, I forgot, I must ask Peter's leave; he is always reminding Sallie and me that we are minors, but I shall assert myself after the 20th of December. Of course," she added hastily, "it was only Peter's fun, for he is not at all a severe guardian; he lets us do as we like with our trifle of money."

It was impossible not to be amused by the girl's fresh ingenuousness, and again that pleasant gleam crossed the Squire's dark face. "And you come of age on the 20th of December; we must do something to celebrate the day. I intend to go over to Wynyards to-morrow, and I will have a talk with your brother and settle things with him."

"Oh, thank you, that will be nice. And please, Mr. Ashton, will you ask Vera to come as early as possible on Friday afternoon, because I shall have so much to say to her and Sallie?" And Mr. Ashton undertook this commission also; and then the dressing-gong sounded and they went back to the house.

Later in the evening Ranee had a little talk with Alix.

"I am so pleased that you like the idea, Ray. I am sure you will be delighted with Cannes. And we are going to such a nice Pension. Madame Jules Berthier is a sort of connection of our old friend; she is an Englishwoman, and her husband is Madame Berthier's nephew; he is such a clever man, quite a scientist in his way, and they have always such nice people staying there. Ranee," and here Alix grew a little pale and agitated, "I hope you won't mind, but I told father that I could not bear to stay in Paris, even for a day; I am afraid it is selfish of me."

"My dear Alix, how can you say such a thing! Of course I understand." Ranee thought secretly how she would have loved to see that wonderful, glittering, enchanting Paris; but she checked the thought as soon as possible.

"Father means to tell Madame Jules that I must have a sitting-room. We know the house, and there is such a pleasant room with a balcony shaded by an awning overlooking the sea, and if one is not strong one does not care to be always with people. And he insists that Binney should go with us; he thinks you are rather young to have so much responsibility, and of course Binney will be a comfort." And so they talked on, until Mr. Ashton came to remind them that it was growing late and that Alix ought to be in bed, and this put a stop to the conversation.

Mr. Ashton rode over to Abbey-Thorpe the next morning, and when he returned to luncheon he brought Ranee a pencilled note from Vera, which told her that they were all delighted that Ray should have such a chance, and that Peter had given his august permission; and then a hasty postscript followed:

Mr. Ashton has asked Sallie and me to spend the whole day at the Garth to-morrow, and Peter will probably join us in the afternoon, so we shall have plenty of time for talk.

Alix was driving with her father when the two girls arrived, but Ranee was watching for them; she wore her red Tam-o'-Shanter and a light plaid across her shoulders. She carried them off at once to the "Seven Sisters," and after a few sympathetic remarks about Alix, they plunged into the weighty subject of clothes.

"Sallie and I were just saying what a good thing it was that you took my advice about that dark blue serge," commenced Vera; "for it will be just the thing, Margaret tells us. But she says that it is cold even in the Riviera sometimes, and you ought to have a warm jacket and a mackintosh."

"Oh, my winter jacket will do," returned Ranee, who was already repenting of the reckless way she spent her quarter's salary; "I have only had it two years."

"Begging your pardon, my dear," observed Vera in her elder sisterly way, "it is far too shabby; it is 'cheap and nasty,' as Sallie says, and you look a regular dowdy in it."

"I can't help that, Vera; I positively refuse to run into debt, or to ask Peter."

"Oh, we knew that beforehand; but Sallie and I are going to make you an advance from the Fund. No, don't shake your head, Ray—you will have a new jacket, Sallie and I are determined on that point; and so, as I say, we will advance the money, and after Christmas, if you choose, you can pay it back."

"Are you sure that will be right, Vera?"

"Quite sure; so that is settled. And now I have something else to tell you. We are going to give you

your birthday presents beforehand; and Peter said, of his own accord, that he meant to get you a mackintosh exactly like the one Dawtie has. There, I knew you would be pleased," as Ranee beamed at this piece of intelligence. "And Sallie and I mean ours to be a nice little travelling bag and purse, for we know you will need them." Then Ranee found it impossible to continue the subject until she had hugged them both.

"But I have something delightful to tell you in my turn," she observed. "You know, Vera, how dreadfully shabby my old trunk is, and of course Alix noticed it too, and last evening the dear creature told me so shyly that she was going to give me a new one like hers, and that when Mr. Ashton went up to town next week he would go to the stores and order it."

"How awfully kind of her!" exclaimed Sallie. "It is well to be you, Ray;" and Sallie heaved an envious little sigh, for the thought of the snow-mountains shining in the sunshine and the sapphire-blue sea fired her artistic little soul. "I feel like Cinderella, and you and Vera are the two proud sisters," she said; "for all the luck are the two proud sisters," she said;" but there was no *malice prepense* in Sallie's speech, and she laughed in a winsome way as she spoke.

Chapter XXXVII

"ARE THERE SUCH THINGS"

Happiness consists in growing into a larger and larger world, with increased faculties of comprehension.—Bishop Creighton.

If it be true that in some measure we create our own heart sunshine by opening our petals to every benign influence as the flowers do to their sun-god, while their roots drink in the moisture of heaven, so it is also true that nothing is more infectious than cheerfulness. A happily disposed person will radiate warmth and brightness to those in his or her immediate environment; and even Alix roused from her sad listlessness as she saw Ranee's intense interest in her preparations; it seemed to her that the girl was in a joyous whirl of activity from morning to night.

Ranee would preach nothing but the gospel of content; she would have no lurking misgivings, no shadow of foreboding to mar her satisfaction. Alix was going to Cannes for the winter because Dr. Alison thought the change and sunshine would do her good, and he did not want her to catch cold. There were fogs at Abbey-Thorpe sometimes, and the east winds were very trying. As for latent mischief in the lung, she had been alarmed for the first moment, but after all it did not amount to much: the latent symptoms would disappear, Alix would come back strong and fat, and they were just going to have a good time.

"Indeed, I hope so, Ranee dear, for your sake," replied Alix quite cheerfully when the girl had delivered herself of some of these sentiments.

"For my sake, and for your sake, and for Mr. Ashton's sake, and for the sake of common-sense," returned Ranee glibly. "Now which are you going to take, Alix—the dressing-gown trimmed with lace or the grey with the white silk frills?"

"Oh, I don't care—either or both; Lawson will know," observed Alix helplessly. "Such little things can't matter, can they? You and Lawson can do as you like." Then Ranee sat down on the floor promptly, looking like a huddled-up and modern edition of patience without her monument, and awaited further developments; her attitude was one of outraged humility.

"Very well, I will take both, then, if Lawson can find room for them." Then Ranee was appeased. "She must and shall find room, for they are both too lovely to be left behind." And so the work went on, Alix half bored and half amused, and secretly puzzled how Ranee could attach so much importance to such trifles.

When Damaris returned from Cromer she came over to the Garth to bid Alix good-bye. She looked well and in good spirits, but she would not stay long. She was going over to the Red House, she said, to see Bear.

Alix received her with her usual gentleness, but it was evident to both the girls that she was not at her ease. Alix's thin little face and drooping air seemed to reproach her, and she shortened her visit as much as possible.

After the first greeting she almost ignored Ranee. "It is well to be you," she had remarked; "you Holt girls remind me of Bear's grey kitten—you always fall on your feet; and if there is a good thing going——"

and here Damaris laughed and gave her favourite little shrug. But there was a trace of acidity in the jesting tone, and Alix coloured a little, as though she resented Dawtie's rudeness; but Ranee only smiled grimly to herself.

Damaris's manner softened a little when she bade Alix good-bye, and as Ranee followed her out of the room she said rather abruptly, "There is not much the matter with her, is there?"

"Oh dear no," returned Ranee cheerfully; and then she repeated the usual formula, that Dr. Alison did not wish her to take cold. "But she is thin—she is certainly too thin," she added regretfully.

"Oh, that's nothing," observed Damaris hastily. "Alix was always thin. Well, don't let her mope; it is ridiculous for a child of her age to go on as she does;" and then Damaris gave her a cool kiss, and stepped into the carriage.

"So you are tired of the Holt girls, are you, Mrs. Damaris?" thought Ranee as she went back to the drawing-room. "Now, I wonder how you are going to behave to Vera and Sallie."

But the next day, when she went over to the Red House, she was able to satisfy herself on this point. Damaris had been extremely cold in her manner to both the girls, Vera as well as Sallie, and she had refused to stay and speak to Peter, who was engaged in his study with a patient.

"She talked more to Carson than to us," observed Sallie indignantly. "And she was only thinking of Bear's winter clothes all the time. And she was not a bit nice and loving with the child."

"But she said Bear looked better than she had ever

seen her, Sallie," observed Vera. "She seemed rather pleased at that."

"Yes, but she would not trouble to go upstairs and see the beautiful clockwork toy Sir Heber had brought her from town," returned Sallie, "though Bear did beg so hard to show it her. And she was as snubbing as possible to Vera, and found fault with two or three things —quite rudely, I thought."

"She was certainly not as nice as usual, Ray," agreed Vera a little sadly; for her "ginger-bread queen," as Ranee had once called her, was stript of its glittering tinsel, and seemed rather an ordinary piece of goods. "She does not care for me as she used"—and Vera flushed in rather a pained way. "Peter's proposed marriage seems to have turned her against us all. She did not even kiss Sallie, though she always does."

"Never mind, Vera dear," returned Ranee soothingly; "we will not waste our precious time by talking about a small-minded little person like Damaris. We have other things far more interesting to discuss." And then, as usual, they plunged into feminine business.

Ranee spent two more nights at the Red House before her departure to pastures new, and bade good-bye to her Abbey-Thorpe friends. Hannah and Margaret Weston gave her pretty little parting presents. Hannah's choice was a small travelling clock, and Margaret's a neat, compact little writing-case.

Alix had kindly arranged that Vera should return with Ranee to the Garth for the last three days, and this was an intense pleasure to both the sisters. Peter and Sallie were at the station to see them off. Ranee was just a little silent as the train moved off the platform; perhaps she could not quite trust her voice at that moment.

It would be months before she would see those dear home faces again, and she knew how they would miss her. But she soon recovered her spirits, and the excitement of travelling and the novelty of her new surroundings soon absorbed her.

Ranee was a famous correspondent. Closely-written sheets of thin foreign paper reached Vera and Sallie weekly. One or other of the girls would read lengthy passages to Peter as he ate his breakfast or supper. Peter would pretend to scoff a little at the enthusiastic descriptions, but he always listened attentively. "Is that all? You may as well finish the whole business, postscript and all," he would say graciously; and he would chuckle to himself over some racy little bit that amused him.

Ranee was enraptured with all she saw. The Pension Berthier was charmingly situated, she wrote, and from the balcony of Alix's sitting-room there was a lovely view over the esplanade and sea-front. Her own bedroom looked landwards on low hills and pretty villas with gardens dotted here and there in the valleys; and she was never weary of dwelling on the strange misty grey tints of the olive wood clothing the slopes, and the wonderful sapphire blue of the Mediterranean.

"I am living in a wonderful new world," she wrote once—"a world of colour and light and sunshine. Are there really such things as fogs and clouds and mists? Every day since we have been here the sun has shone. People say they have never known such a season at Cannes. If I were not ashamed of grumbling, I must own that I feel the heat a little oppressive; and yet it is November. As for Alix, she revels in the warmth. The sunshine gives her new life. She is undoubtedly better already, every one says so; and Mr. Ashton and Binney are in such spirits. Of course we are very careful, and do not allow our

precious invalid to take liberties, for they tell us here that though so beautifully dry and sunny, the climate is at times treacherous. Let me quote a passage from the guidebook for Sir Oracle's benefit; it will be of use to him in dealing with his patients: 'The electrical condition of the climate of Cannes, as well as its equable warmth and dryness, together with the stimulating properties of the atmosphere, indicates its fitness for scrofulous and lymphatic temperaments.' Alix is decidedly lymphatic."

Ranee's description of the Pension Berthier and its inmates were much enjoyed at the Red House. Ranee had the happy knack of portraying vividly the different personalities that interested her, so that her correspondents could also realise them. She drew quite a little gallery of portraits for Vera and Sallie's benefit. The portly but comely hostess, with her kind eyes and invariable black silk and pink ribbons; the sallow, grey-haired Monsieur Berthier, spectacled, solemn, but extremely interesting; the fair-haired little Gräfin, with her dollish prettiness and china-blue eyes, and her big stalwart, silent husband, her handsome poodle, with his silver collar, and her French maid. There was a Madame de la Motte too—a sad-faced elderly woman, a great invalid, who had resently lost her husband. She had a son and a daughter with her. The son was a light-hearted young officer who was a general favourite, and his sister, Pauline, a plain young woman, but excessively amiable, and devoted to her mother and brother.

"She is a saint, if there ever was one," wrote Ranee. "Madame Berthier says so, and I quite believe it. She is the sort of person you read of in goody-goody books, but who are never canonised except by their own people. She is a Roman Catholic. So is the little Gräfin Clotilde and her big Viking of an Oscar; her 'man-mountain,' I call him. But Mademoiselle Pauline is

extremely religious; and Madame Berthier confided to me the other day that when the mother dies—poor lady, she has some distressing and incurable complaint—*cette chère* Mademoiselle Pauline means to become a Poor Clare or a Little Sister of the Poor. She has a vocation and a passion for nursing, and has renounced the world and all its pomps and vanities.

"'Why don't you follow your excellent sister's example, Monsieur de la Motte?' I said to him one day, when he was teasing Alix and me to drive to Vallauris and return by the Corniche Road, and to dine at the Observatoire de la Corniche. 'You are always trying to kill time and amuse yourself; I fear that you have by no means renounced the world and its pomps and vanities.' For we are great friends, Monsieur Isidore and I—'what you Anglais call "chums,"' as he observed once. For I am giving him English lessons; only he is so excessively idle that he does me no credit. Alix declares that he is head over heels in love with me, and Mr. Ashton teases me a little about him; but I don't care one little bit. Pauline says it is just Isidore's way; he is *beau garçon*, and every woman he meets is adorable until he replaces her image with a new divinity.

"No, my dear," as a sarcastic remark of Peter's was retorted in the next letter, "tell Peter that he may possess his soul in peace. I am still fancy-free, and invulnerable to the charms of a brown-faced Lieutenant of Hussars, though he dances like an angel and has the prettiest little waxed moustache in the world."

Ranee's next letter was still more interesting. Some really nice English people had arrived at the Pension Berthier. Mr. Herbert Moore and his two daughters, both young, good-looking, and extremely pleasant girls. The elder one, Eleanor—or Nellie, as she was called—was engaged to a young barrister, but the recent death of their mother had postponed the marriage. She and Alix fraternised; the younger of the two, Kitty, was Ranee's favourite. Mr. Moore was suffering from overwork and from the effects of his wife's long illness. He was a barrister with a large practice, and he had come

to the Riviera to rest and recruit. He was a well-read and extremely intellectual man, and from the first he and Mr. Ashton seemed mutually drawn together.

"Alix is so pleased with the Ashton-Moore alliance," wrote Ranee. "She declares that it has lifted a load off her. 'Father will really enjoy himself,' she went on, 'now that he has found a congenial companion; they have so much in common. Dear father is sacrificing all his interests and home comforts for me, and I am so thankful to see that since the Moores came he is beginning to enjoy himself. There they are on the esplanade together,' she continued, smiling in quite her old way. And there, sure enough, were two tall figures marching down the sea-front, and so absorbed in their talk that they never saw poor little Monsieur Isidore strutting past them."

It was quite evident to the family at the Red House that Ranee was enjoying every moment of the day, and each letter contained a description of some delightful expedition, in many of which Alix was now strong enough to join.

They drove to the Golfe de Juan and up the valley to Vallauris, and a lively party, including the Moores and Monsieur de la Motte, had luncheon at the Observatoire de la Corniche, with its delightful views of the Alps and the country round Bordighera.

Another day Mr. Ashton hired a carriage and drove her and Alix and Kitty Moore to La Croisette, where they visited the orange orchard Des Hesperides; and the following week they went to Grasse by rail, leaving Alix in Binney's care. Nellie Moore and her father accompanied them. They visited the Rue des Cordeliers, and returned to the pension in the evening laden with bottles of perfumery—rose water and otto of rose and néroly—and boxes of confectionery.

Towards the end of November, as the weather continued mild and sunny, and Alix grew every day stronger and more like her old self, Mr. Ashton carried out his plan of taking the girls to Nice. The English doctor at Cannes whom he had consulted thought the change would be good for Alix, and it was decided that rooms should be taken in the Grand Hotel fronting the pleasant gardens of the Square Massena. As Alix was so much better, Binney was to be left at the Pension Berthier.

From Nice Mr. Ashton proposed to make their way to Monaco, and here they would remain for two nights to visit the Casino at Monte Carlo and enjoy the wonderful scenery.

Ranee grew almost incoherent in her attempts to give her sisters some idea of the beauties that surrounded her. The snow-capped mountains in the sunshine, the olive and pine tree woods that clothed the ravines, the blue blackness of the pines, and the misty grey light of the olive trees and the groves of lemon trees in the valley of St. Roman.

"Monte Carlo is like Paradise after the Serpent had entered it," she went on. "If I wrote pages I could never make you see its beauties—flowers and sunshine, and the deep blue glittering sea, the orange and lemon groves, and the gardens; and then those great glittering halls and rooms, and all those faces, young and old, eager, concentrated, many of them painted and so haggard. Oh, it was so dreadful and yet so absorbing that I could have watched for hours; only Mr. Ashton would not let me stay; he said it was not safe, that in another half-hour the gambling fever would have seized me, and I should be staking my last coin. Do you think he was right, Vera? Would the nasal, monotonous voice of the croupier, with his ceaseless 'Faites votre jeu, mesdames, messieurs,' exasperate me into putting that poor little five-franc piece on the table just for the pleasure of seeing it raked up? My dear, I dare not question

myself too closely. The next moment a hand touched my shoulder. 'You must come away, please, it is getting late, and Alix will be expecting us back.' And then we went out again among the roses and orange trees. The sun had set, but there was a lovely light across the water; the band was playing a sweet, melancholy strain, and behind me I heard a sound like a woman's sob, and the next moment a tall figure closely veiled brushed past us. Mr. Ashton heard it too. 'It was the lady sitting close to you,' I whispered. 'She had such a beautiful face, though the eyes were sunken and haggard. I could not help watching her. There was something terrible in her eagerness. Did you see how her hand trembled as she pushed back the little pile of money? She seemed hardly able to speak. I think her face will haunt me.' 'Poor soul,' muttered Mr. Ashton, but he seemed anxious to change the subject. Well dears, to-morrow we return to Nice, for one night, and then our delightful jaunt will be over. It has been a glorious success, and I am sure that Alix has enjoyed it, but I think she will be glad to get back to the Pension Berthier."

"Ranee is a lucky girl!" exclaimed Sallie, laying down the letter with a half-stifled sigh. For it was a dull foggy morning, and the sitting-room at the Red House looked a little dingy in spite of the bright fire. And as Sallie placed her easel in the window she thought rather enviously of Ranee's continual sunshine, until she worked herself into a happier mood.

"Dear old Ra, she deserves her good things," she said to herself, with an affectionate glance at the thin foreign sheets that lay on the table. But how Vera and I miss her. "As for Peter, Hannah consoles him." But here a whistle from the passage announced Peter's return from his morning round, and the next moment he entered the room, looking cheerfulness personified.

"Halloo, Sallie, you ought not to be trying your eyes in this way. Look here, I am going to give you a treat.

Next week Hannah and I are going up to London for a day's shopping, and we mean to take you with us, and drop you at one of the picture galleries for a couple of hours while we do our business. And then we will have luncheon at some restaurant and go to a matinée. David Garrick is on. Are you up to the spree?"

"Oh, Peter, how delightful of you and Hannah!" and Sallie's eyes sparkled with pleasure. A whole day in town—pictures, theatre, and luncheon at a restaurant! No girl was happier than little Sallie for the remainder of the day.

Chapter XXXVIII

"A LETTER FOR MISS HOLT"

You have that in your face and manners which authorises trust.
—*Rob Roy.*

Mistrust me not! though some there be
That fain would spot my steadfastness;
Believe them not! since that ye see
The proof is not as they express.
WYATT.

THE weeks passed rapidly away at the Pension Berthier, when one morning about the middle of December Mr. Ashton entered his daughter's sitting-room with his hands full of papers and letters. He found a cheerful little party grouped round the window opening on to the wide balcony. Kitty Moore was teaching Alix some new and fashionable work, and Ranee and Nellie were busy with their correspondence, though every now and then they paused to join in the conversation.

"A letter for Miss Holt," observed Mr. Ashton, pausing near her chair, "and two for Miss Moore. The rest are for you, Alix. Now I will go and read mine. That seat on the balcony looks rather inviting. Who could believe that this is the 15th of December? It was so hot walking from the Post Office that I was obliged to put up my sun-umbrella."

"What a nice, thick, bulky letter!" exclaimed Ranee in a pleased tone. "And it is from Vera too. I have

not heard from her for ages. Sallie wrote last, and her letters are always so scrappy. They are like serials. She breaks off at the most interesting points, with a sort of bracketed remark that breakfast or dinner is waiting, and then starts off afresh some hours later. But Vera's never disappoint one," and with these words she glanced eagerly at the opening sentences. The next moment there was a half-suppressed exclamation, and then Ranee folded the sheets hurriedly together and left the room; but not before Nellie Moore had caught sight of her face.

"Oh, what is it?" asked Alix anxiously; "I do hope Ranee has no bad news in her letter."

"I think you may make your mind easy on that score," returned Nellie, with a smile. "If it is anything it is good news, I am quite sure of that. She has only gone off to enjoy her letter in peace because Kitty chatters so. She reminds me of our old Rollo, who always carries off his bone to a corner under the scullery table, that he may gnaw it in comfort and privacy. Ranee was biting her lip to keep herself from smiling when she went out of the room." And after that Alix was more satisfied. Very little made her nervous, and though her spirits had improved she had still fits of melancholy, when even the girls' cheerful companionship failed to rouse her; but on the whole she had greatly mended.

Meanwhile Ranee had locked herself in her room and placed herself near the open window looking over the wide stretch of country, and with flushed face was devouring the closely written sheets.

"Oh, Ranee, my darling," Vera began, "if you were only beside me now, for I do want you so! I just feel that I should

like to put my arms round you and whisper my secret in your ear. I just know how your dear face would look. Your eyes would be so bright and big, with a sort of misty shine in them, and we should just cuddle each other as we did in the old nursery days, when we shared our sugar-stick—oh, you know what I mean. And now no whisper will reach you, and I must write my news. There, I will not keep you waiting with my nonsense any more. Dear Ra, I am so happy, so awfully happy. Yesterday Sir Heber asked me to marry him, and I said yes. Somehow I am not sure that this will be a surprise to you. Peter tells me that he has been expecting it for months; that any child could see that he—Sir Heber, I mean—was head over heels in love with me. These are Peter's words. You have no idea how pleased the dear boy is. He was quite choky when he gave me his good wishes, and he walked to the window and looked out for quite a long time; and when he came back to me his eyes were so bright and excited. And he said quite seriously that it was not because Sir Heber was a baronet and a rich man that he was so delighted—though it was a grand thing, of course, for one of his sisters to make such a splendid match—but what pleased him most was that he was such a downright good fellow, and that he knew I should be safe in his hands. And then he kissed me in such a nice way. I felt I must tell you this. But now I must begin at the very beginning, as Sallie always says, and explain how it all came about.

"You know, I saw very little of Sir Heber for weeks and weeks after you left, and somehow I missed him dreadfully. I don't mind owning that now. We had become such friends, and he was always so kind, and seemed to understand things, that I learnt to depend on him for sympathy. And when you had gone away, Ray, and he was with his poor friend at Tenby, I did feel rather dull, though I would not have let you know it for worlds. You dear thing, you were so happy, and were having such a good time.

"Well, as I told you, poor Mr. Hargraves had to undergo an operation, and Sir Heber—but I call him Heber now—brought him to London, and remained with him until all danger was over. Of course I thought when he came back to Godstone Park that we should see him as usual. But no, he was too busy. He went up to town once or twice a week, and a hurried visit now

and then was all he could spare for his friends at the Red House; and as either Peter or Sallie or Bear were in the room, he never found an opportunity of speaking to me alone. He told me this yesterday. You know Mr. Hargraves' home is in Aberdeenshire, and when he was well enough for the journey Sir Heber promised to go with him and spend a week at Deepdene, as the Hargraves' place is called. He did not a bit want to go, but Vincent Hargraves was so persistent, and being an invalid Sir Heber did not like thwarting him. But they kept him there nearly a fortnight on some pretext or other, and he actually never came back until two days ago; and then we knew nothing about it. I think Gavin must have been told to hold his tongue, for when he came as usual yesterday morning to take Bear out he never said a word about his master.

"Well, to proceed with my long story. You must know that Margaret had invited Sallie and Bear to tea that afternoon, and as Peter intended to have his at Wayside, I told Judith to bring me in a cup when she had hers. But long before tea-time the bell rang, and the next moment Sir Heber was announced.

"You may imagine my surprise, for I thought he was still in Aberdeenshire, and I suppose I must have changed colour, or in some way shown that I was pleased to see him, for almost before Judith had closed the door, he had taken both my hands, and was holding them so tightly, and he looked I don't know how, as though he had not seen me for years, and he said in a voice I did not recognise, 'At last I have found you alone, Vera, and I can speak'; and then—and then—you can guess the rest. . . . By and bye we were sitting on the couch together, and he was asking me in such a kind, simple way if I were quite sure that I cared enough for him to marry him. He was very persistent about this, though I cannot recollect his words.

"'There is no need for me to say much on my side,' he went on. 'I think I have loved you ever since the first day we met. Do you remember that wet afternoon at the lodge, when I was mending Jenny's bird-cage? Well, I lost my heart to you then. For months you have been the dearest thing on earth to me; but though I would give all that I possess to make you my wife, I will not marry you unless you can honestly tell me that my affection is returned.'

"Oh, Ranee, was it not embarrassing? But I had to speak,

and after a time I managed to satisfy him. But I loved him too dearly to leave him in doubt. Oh, how happy we were! It was too delicious for words! Judith baked some of her nice scones, and that made tea later than usual, but neither of us minded that, and as Sallie and Bear did not return until six, we had another hour's talk. I told Heber—yes, I must call him Heber, even to you, because I know he would like it—that I feared Dawtie would be angry at his marrying me. 'She has ceased to care for me,' I remarked, 'and Peter's engagement to Hannah Burke seems to have set her against us all. Dawtie is so very fickle.'

"'I am afraid you are right,' he returned, for he is always so honest, and never glosses over difficulties. 'I should not be surprised if Damaris turns a bit nasty. I shall write very fully to her in a few days, and make her understand that Godstone can no longer be her home. I am willing to make her a proper allowance, but I shall insist on her living within her income. As for Bear——' and here he stopped and looked at me.

"'Oh, surely you will not part with Bear!' I exclaimed. 'You are so fond of her, and she is so happy and good with you, and Dawtie only spoils and mismanages her. I am afraid it is a dreadful thing to say of any mother, but I don't think she really cares for the child.' But though he let this pass I know he agreed with me.

"'If you are sure you will not mind it?' he said so tenderly. 'You are my first thought now, dear, and everything shall be as you wish.' But when I told him how grieved I should be to part with Bear, he seemed so grateful, and thanked me as though I had conferred some favour on him.

"'Very well then, I know what to say to Damaris,' he went on. 'It is within the limits of probability that she may be so vexed at my news that she will try to annoy me by insisting on having Bear sent to her at once.'

"'That was my fear too,' I told him; but he only smiled.

"'I know how to bring her to reason,' he returned. 'If she persists in removing Bear from my control just to gratify her temper, I shall at once withdraw half her allowance, and you will find this a potent argument. Oh, you may leave Damaris to me. But now we have something far more interesting to discuss.' But at this moment Sallie and Bear walked in. Was it not provoking? But, after all, I had had him to myself for nearly

three hours. Now it is late, and I can write no more. This letter shall go as it is. I have not time even to read it over. Good night, darling. Some day may you be as happy as I am! God bless you.—Your loving VERA."

It was quite an hour before Ranee could lay down that entrancing letter and go back to Alix. The Moore girls had been summoned by their father for a walk, and Mr. Ashton was reading the paper to his daughter. They both looked up smiling and expectant at the sight of the girl's glowing face. To one of them Ranee looked positively beautiful with that rich colour suffusing her cheeks and that misty softness in her eyes. "Oh, such news!" she exclaimed—"such lovely news! My dear Vera is engaged. She is going to marry Sir Heber Maxwell, and Peter and every one is so delighted."

"Oh, I am so glad!" exclaimed Alix; but her smile was rather wistful. "Vera is so sweet—how could Sir Heber help loving her? But I don't believe father is a bit surprised!"

"It was an open secret to one or two people, I fancy," returned Mr. Ashton in a somewhat amused tone. "I only wondered why Maxwell did not speak months ago. But I expect he waited until Mrs. Lugard had left the coast clear—Maxwell is a shy man." Then at the mention of Damaris, Alix looked grave.

"Oh, I do hope Dawtie will not give trouble," she observed with a sigh; "but I am sure, from the way she talked, that she never expected Sir Heber to marry. 'He is a confirmed old bachelor,' she said once; 'matrimony and falling in love are not in his line at all.'"

"Confirmed old bachelors sometimes spring surprises on their friends," returned Mr. Ashton with an enigmatical smile. "Well, Miss Holt, I think Maxwell is a

lucky fellow, and I shall write and tell him so. And if you will allow me to say so, I think your sister is also to be congratulated. Maxwell is just the man to make her happy."

"Oh, I hope so; he is very nice and kind," replied Ranee. And then she added, in her naïve way, "But I cannot help wishing sometimes that he were better-looking; he is so very ordinary, you know." And this frank piece of criticism evidently amused Mr. Ashton.

"Oh, I would not worry about that," he returned kindly. "I expect your sister thinks him quite handsome by this time. Love is a magician, Miss Ranee; beauties are magnified and defects and imperfections diminished; and for your comfort, I expect Maxwell will wear well, and grow younger every year. Believe me," with a touch of seriousness, "there is nothing like a sweet-tempered, sensible little wife for rejuvenating a man." And then an interruption occurred, and the conversation was abruptly broken off.

Ranee spent the remainder of the afternoon writing to Vera, and she looked so flushed and weary with excitement when she joined the others at tea-time, that Mr. Ashton insisted on carrying her off for a brisk walk, and the air and exercise did her a world of good.

But she was very homesick that night, and lay awake thinking of Vera for hours; and for the next week or two she simply lived for letters. Every one seemed to consider it a bounden duty to write to her: not only Sallie and Peter, but Hannah and Margaret Weston sent warm letters of congratulation and sympathy. Sallie's enclosed a blotted little scrawl from Bear.

"Dear Miss Ray," she wrote, "isn't it too lovely! Uncle Heber has just told me and Gavin. My dear Vera is going to be

my aunt, and I am to live with them, and we are all to be as happy as the day is long. Oh, how I did hug Uncle Heber when he said that! But I could not help crying, I felt so joyful; only Gavin startled me by giving three cheers and saying 'Hurrah for the Squire and his young lady,' and that made me laugh."

Ranee had enough to occupy her just then, for she was busy packing a box of Christmas presents for the dear people at the Red House. A lady who had been spending a month at the pension was returning to England, and promised to convey it with her luggage as far as London, and then send it off to Abbey-Thorpe. It was delightful work, for she could imagine Vera's and Sallie's pleasure when they saw the foreign luxuries—bottles of rose water and eau-de-Cologne, boxes of candied fruits and delicious bonbons, besides odds and ends of every description. Alix added many pretty little gifts, and seemed almost as much interested as Ranee herself.

Ranee had received all her birthday and Christmas presents beforehand, but she had plenty of home letters and cards. Vera wrote perpetually. "Ranee was her other self, and must know everything—from the splendid diamond ring that Sir Heber had given her, to the hateful letter that Dawtie had written."

"You know, Ray dear," went on Vera, "there was no need for her to write to me at all unless she were prepared to receive me as a sister, and I certainly never expected a line from her. Oh, it was such an unkind letter—so cruel and untrue! Just fancy, dear, she accused me of taking advantage of her kindness to me to entrap her brother. She actually hinted that we Holt girls were unscrupulous and designing, and she declared that Heber would never have fallen in love with me if I had not laid myself out to catch him. Oh, I can't remember half the sneering, horrid things she said, but all the time I was reading them I felt as though she were pelting me with small jagged stones that hurt awfully. I think I should have cried myself

ill over it, only Heber came in. He had had a letter himself from Dawtie, and was coming to me for comfort; but when he saw the state I was in, he was so angry. He took the letter out of my hands, and said I must let him read it; and he would not listen when I begged him to burn it unread; he just carried it off to the window, while I sat sobbing helplessly. He came back presently, but I scarcely knew his face, it was so stern. Then he tore the letter across and threw it into the fire, and watched until every atom was consumed; and then he sat down beside me, but I would speak first. I told him that there were some things a woman could not bear, and that Dawtie's cruel accusations had stung me to the quick. 'You know it is not true, Heber,' I said quite piteously. 'I never tried to entrap you or to win your affection; and none of us girls are unscrupulous or designing——' But he would not let me go on.

"'Hush, child,' he said, 'why do you say these things to me? Don't you know that I would answer with my life for your innocence and absence of guilt? You unscrupulous and designing! Why, Vera, my darling, don't you think I know you better than that?'

"'But Dawtie?' I whispered; for I could not let him comfort me all at once.

"'Damaris will have to reckon with me,' he returned quite haughtily. 'To-night I shall answer both these letters; for mine is almost as offensive as yours. When Damaris is in a temper she does not measure her words.'

"'Shall you be very angry with her, Heber?'

"'I shall be very brief,' was the stern response. 'I will not allow her to hold communication with me until she has sent you a letter of apology and retracted all her falsehoods. And I shall also tell her that her sickening pretence of yearning for Bear's society does not impose on me in the least; that she has proved herself an unfit guardian for her child; but that if she still persists in her intention of having Bear to live with her, she must content herself with half the allowance I intended for her maintenance, and that it would be paid for the future through my lawyers. I think that will settle the business.' And then he would not talk any more about it, and he was so dear and kind, that I could not help being happy again. Oh, Ray dear, I do think he is the nicest and best man in the world!"

Chapter XXXIX

A FALSE STEP

This self-control, at all times and under all circumstances, is one of the most important and difficult things to be acquired.—ANON.

Courage may be displayed in everyday life as well as on the historic fields of activity.—MARDEN.

ALL this time Ranee's letters had never varied in their cheerfulness and bright optimism; but when the New Year opened there was a faint trace of anxiety in her remarks about Alix.

The Christmas festivities at the Pension Berthier had tried her, she wrote, and ever since she had seemed drooping and out of spirits. The weather, too, was colder and less favourable for invalids, and though there was still sunshine during some part of the day, the mistral, that troublesome and most treacherous of winds, often compelled her to remain indoors.

"We have had two or three wet, cloudy days lately," she went on. "I am told that this is rather exceptional, as bright, dusty weather is the rule at this season. Alix is very dependent on sunshine, and though her sitting-room is warm and comfortable, and the view charming, the confinement to the house seems irksome to her, and for the last two days her appetite has failed. Mr. Ashton says that he shall ask Dr. Lyster to call and see her."

The next letter was even less cheerful. Dr. Lyster had thoroughly examined his patient, and the result was not satisfactory; in his opinion Alix had lost ground, she was not gaining flesh, and the latent lung trouble was becoming active. Binney often heard her coughing at night. Until the weather became warm she would need the greatest care.

"Poor Mr. Ashton is so disheartened," went on Ranee, "because he thought that Alix was so much better—indeed we all did; she seemed so like her old self, and really enjoyed things, but now the depression has returned."

"'Troubles never come singly,' she wrote in her next letter. "I am sure, Vera dear, you will be sorry for us when I tell you that we have to part with our friends the Moores. A brother of Mr. Moore's who lives in America has taken a villa at Nice and is there with his family, and they have invited Mr. Moore and the girls to join them for a few weeks. Nellie and Kitty declare they would rather remain at the Pension Berthier; but Mr. Moore is naturally anxious to see his brother, and he thinks the girls ought to make the acquaintance of their cousins; so on Monday they are leaving us, and poor little Monsieur Isidore is *désolé*. I think Kitty is his last flame, though it is rather a case of 'How happy can I be with either, when t'other dear charmer's away.'"

But though Ranee wrote in this flippant fashion, her heart was strangely heavy at times, and there was something quite touching in the way in which she implored Vera to write and tell her everything. "Nothing cheers me like a home letter," she finished.

Vera responded nobly to this appeal. Every day something fresh and interesting seemed to happen, and she often sat up an hour later at night to write to Ranee.

The first piece of intelligence was that Damaris, cowed

by her brother's stern threats, had sent Vera a letter of apology.

"I was dreadfully cross when I read Heber's letter," she wrote, "for the idea of his falling in love and marrying any one never entered my head, and I had been mistress at Godstone so long that I naturally hated being deposed; but of course it was very wrong for me to vent my unhappiness on your head. You know I am a very nippy little person when my fur is stroked the wrong way; but, my dear Vera, you do not need me to tell you that I did not mean all the horrid things I wrote. My steam was up, and I wanted a safety-valve for fear I should explode. If Heber had written differently I should not have made myself so disagreeable; but you must forgive my cross fit, and kiss and be friends.—Your affectionate and penitent

"DAWTIE."

Vera had sent the letter to Ranee, but that astute young person had shaken her head as she replaced it in the envelope.

"It is a bit forced," she said to herself, "and I don't believe she is properly sorry for her rudeness and lies; but she is a coward, and Sir Heber has got the whip hand of her. She is just the same horrid little cat that I always thought her, and I hope Vera will not be too forgiving;" and then she went on with Vera's letter.

Damaris had been evidently much frightened by her brother's curt communication. The threat of a curtailed allowance paid through a lawyer brought her very quickly to her senses; to indulge her ill-humour and spite at such a cost was clearly an impossible luxury. The idea of cheap lodgings with an ailing child and a diminished wardrobe was simply odious; her maternal instinct was not sufficiently developed to admit of such self-sacrifice. Damaris was almost abject in her apologies to her brother.

She excused her hastiness and bad temper, and begged him to burn her letter, little thinking that he had done so the moment he had read it.

"Of course I agree to your terms, my dear Heber," she went on; "I never really meant to take Bear from you. With the small income you propose to give me [this was ungrateful of Damaris, as Sir Heber was providing for her most generously] I could not give her the advantages that she has at Godstone. Carson's ways are so extravagant that I should have to part with her, and then the poor child would miss Gavin. Under these circumstances I must sacrifice my feelings and consent to this unnatural separation, but I trust you will allow me to see my child sometimes."

Sir Heber gave a grim little smile when he read this passage to Vera. "That means that Damaris hopes to pay us long visits, and that Bear will be her excuse; but I will make no promises, the length of her visit will depend on her behaviour to my wife"—a speech which made Vera blush and betake herself to her work.

Sir Heber was very anxious for an early marriage, Vera told her sister, but the date was a matter of some difficulty.

"You know, Ray dear," she went on, "Wayside is quite finished and looks beautiful, and Peter and Hannah fully intended to be married quite early in April; but now Peter says that he must give me away, and that our wedding had better come first. He and Heber have been talking it over, and they think that if we—Heber and I, I mean—would fix a day during the first week in April, he and Hannah could still be married before the end of the month; and I believe this will be settled. Of course you will be home long before that, Ray. In any case, Alix must promise to spare you to us at least three weeks before the wedding."

Alix gave a melancholy smile when Ranee repeated this to her. "You need not fear, dearest," she said gently. "Even if I do not return to England quite soon, I will gladly spare you; and father will find some way of getting you safely home. Are you sure the middle of March will be soon enough?" And Ranee assured her earnestly that she would be quite satisfied with that date.

Later on, when they talked it over with Mr. Ashton, he proved himself equally considerate. "Alix would have her faithful Binney," he said, "and they would do quite well. Under the circumstances, it was clearly Miss Holt's duty to be with her family, and of course she would remain at the Red House until after her brother's marriage."

"Other arrangements could wait," went on Mr. Ashton rather hurriedly; "things would settle themselves by and by." He looked at Ranee somewhat wistfully as he spoke, as though a dim fear crossed his mind that all these changes would prevent her returning to the Garth. "There was the child Sallie——" But here he checked himself abruptly, and taking up the book he had laid down, he asked Alix if he should go on with the story; for in the late afternoons it had become his habit to read aloud to the girls. Ranee would do her lace-work, but Alix's embroidery often lay untouched in her lap, and she would listen with closed eyes, her thoughts often wandering from the subject.

Vera had confided to her sister that she was already hard at work, and that Margaret Weston and Hannah, and even Sallie, were helping her.

"You know how beautifully Margaret works," she went on, "and Hannah is almost as clever with her needle. She is not making her own things, so she has plenty of leisure, and some-

times she sits with me the whole morning, and is so nice and sisterly. I am really getting very fond of her."

There was no end to Vera's confidences. She told Ranee as a great secret that Heber had begged to provide the trousseau.

"Wasn't it dear of him?" she wrote. "But neither Peter nor I could bear the idea. Peter has made quite a lot of money lately, and he thinks he can spare me enough to get a few frocks. I have been talking it over with Margaret—she is such a sensible creature—and we both agree that if I have a few nice things I can manage quite well. 'When you are his wife, Vera,' she said, 'you won't mind his giving you all you want; and as you tell me that he intends to make you a handsome allowance, you need not trouble about many clothes.' Don't you think she is right, Ray? Heber pretends to be hurt, and declares I am very proud and independent, but I am sure he respects me all the more."

And then she went on to tell Ranee about the Maxwell jewels and an old-fashioned diamond necklace that had belonged to Heber's great-grandmother, which he was having reset for her.

It was well that Ranee had all these home interests to occupy her mind, for her anxiety about Alix increased daily, and she often felt heavy-hearted. Perhaps Mr. Ashton noticed how her spirits flagged, for one bright sunny morning he proposed a little expedition for the afternoon. There was a châlet a few miles away, situated in a lovely gorge, where people often drove to have coffee and cakes on the terrace and enjoy the sunset. There was a tiny waterfall in the grounds, and the effect of the afterglow on the snow-topped mountains had been described to him as extraordinarily beautiful. Ranee thought the programme very inviting, nevertheless she

demurred. They would be away some hours, and she did not like leaving Alix. But to her surprise Mr. Ashton persisted in the wisdom of his scheme.

Alix was better than usual, he said, and the weather was so mild that she would be able to go out in her donkey-chair at mid-day, and of course he would accompany her as usual. They would not start until after luncheon, when Alix would be taking her afternoon rest, and they would be back before dinner. The road was excellent, and the drive would hardly take three-quarters of an hour.

Here Monsieur Berthier tapped at the sitting-room door to ask Mr. Ashton a question, and Alix took advantage of his brief absence to say hurriedly, "Please go, Ranee; it will do father so much good, and he has been so dull ever since the Moores left. Indeed, I do not in the least mind being alone; and if I feel I need companionship, I know Pauline de la Motte would sit with me." And this removed Ranee's last scruple.

It was a lovely afternoon, and Ranee soon forgot all anxieties in her intense enjoyment of the glorious scenery. More than once Mr. Ashton stopped the driver that they might gather wild-flowers. In the olive wood the star anemones and periwinkles were springing up, and in sheltered hollows they found violets and purple anemones. As Mr. Ashton saw the girl springing down the hillside laden with blossoms, he thought she looked more like Hebe than ever.

A short hour brought them to the châlet and coffee and delicious cakes were served to them in a little alcove overlooking the grounds and the waterfall. The view was so entrancing that Ranee could hardly be induced to move. "It is almost too beautiful for earth," she said.

"Look at that golden light on that whiteness, Mr. Ashton; it seems as though heaven is going to open. Oh, it is too lovely—it makes me giddy!"

"Then in that case we had better not inspect the waterfall," returned Mr. Ashton, smiling; "sometimes the stones are a little slippery." But Ranee would not listen to this prudent advice.

"I was only speaking figuratively," she returned; "I am not really giddy, and I do so want to stand on that little bridge below us."

"Well, then, as it is getting late and our driver is waiting, we had better hurry. But you must let me help you, Miss Ranee; I cannot let you go alone. Those moss-covered stones look treacherous." But it was doubtful if Ranee heard this—the noise of the little waterfall and the creaking of a waggon in the yard close by drowned Mr. Ashton's voice—for she began descending the ladder-like steps that led from the balcony. There was a hand-rail for safety, but the wood had become rotten with age, and as Ranee placed her hand on it, to Mr. Ashton's horror it gave way, and at the same instant her foot slipped on the wet, greasy step. The next moment she would have been dashed to pieces on the stones below, only a strong arm caught her and held her fast; and lifting her as easily as though she were an infant, Mr. Ashton succeeded in climbing up the ladder again to the balcony. But it was a moment of awful peril to them both! Ranee was too dazed to move; she leant against him, drawing little sobbing breaths. For a minute Mr. Ashton seemed unable to speak; the effort would have been impossible to a weaker or less muscular man.

"Child, why did you disobey me?" he said at last, and his voice was so strange and broken that Ranee

looked at him in alarm. He was white as death, and the drops of perspiration were standing on his brow. "Do you know, you might have been killed before my eyes?"

"Did you tell me not to go? I never heard; the waterfall drowned your voice. Please forgive me. But I might have killed you too!" And here she began to sob again, and clung to him, hardly knowing that she did so. Then at the sight of her terror and distress Mr. Ashton pulled himself together.

"Hush, dear, you are safe now—quite safe with me, my little Ranee. God has been very merciful to us both." And then, rightly judging that the sight of the waterfall would only increase her agitation, he put her in the carriage and placed himself beside her, and told the coachman to take them as quickly as possible to the Pension Berthier.

Perhaps Mr. Ashton thought it advisable to leave the girl to herself for a little, for he kept silence, and Ranee was the first to speak. "Oh, are you sure you have forgiven me?" she said piteously. "Indeed—indeed I did not hear you speak." Then he tried to smile as he took her hand.

"Then in that case I have nothing to forgive. But, Ranee, you must promise me one thing. Alix must not know this; she sleeps badly, and she would be terribly upset. Will you try and be brave for Alix's sake?"

"Yes, I will try," she returned humbly. But he did not relinquish her hand; perhaps he felt how cold and how trembling it was, and what great need she had of comfort.

"And I might have killed you too!" she whispered after a few minutes' silence. "Oh, Mr. Ashton, it turns me giddy to think of it; but I cannot imagine how you

brought me up that ladder, and"—with a shudder—"there was nothing to hold."

"I carried you," was the grave answer; "you were very light, and I have a strong head. Now I am going to ask you a great favour, and I think I have some right to expect it to be granted."

"Oh yes—yes."

"Will you give me your promise—your faithful promise not to dwell on all this more than you can help? Oh yes, I know, one cannot always help one's thoughts; but when one has been saved from a great danger it is best to rest and be thankful. I want to feel, for my own peace of mind, that you will not brood unnecessarily over this."

"I will try not to let it haunt me," returned Ranee in a low voice; "but I can never forget." And then she felt her hand pressed as he gently laid it down, for they were within sight of the pension.

Chapter XL

"LIKE AS A FATHER——"

No anxious care need wake for her,
No grief, no fear, no prayer;
There is no trouble that can reach
Her gentle spirit there.

ANON.

As they went up the staircase, Binney came out of the little sitting-room, closing the door carefully behind her. She had a worried expression.

"It was not my fault, sir," she began rather incoherently, addressing her master, "for I knew no more about it than a child unborn; and it was very wrong of Miss Alix to steal a march on me in that fashion." Binney often called her young mistress by her maiden name. "How am I to remember that she has been married, when I look at her baby face?" she would say in an injured tone.

"What is wrong, my good Binney?" asked Mr. Ashton. But his face became grave when she told her story.

She had left Alix in her room, warmly covered over, with her book beside her, that she might read herself to sleep as usual, and had gone downstairs to finish ironing some handkerchiefs; an hour later she had returned with a cup of hot milk, and found the room empty and the bird flown. The sitting-room had evidently not been entered, for the window was wide open.

"Well, sir," continued Binney, "I was in such a fuss that I hardly knew what to do next. I went down to Mademoiselle de la Motte's room, but she was out, and so was Madame Berthier; and when I questioned the garçon he knew nothing. Would you believe it, I was such a ninny that for more than a quarter of an hour I never thought of looking in Miss Alix's wardrobe; but there, when I did, sure enough her hat and warm jacket were missing." Here Mr. Ashton suppressed an exclamation. "So I went down to the front door and stood there, though the wind up that side street was enough to cut one in halves; and after a minute or two I saw Alix hurrying along the sea-front, and looking so flushed and tired and——"

"What are you telling father?" asked Alix, appearing suddenly at the door, and looking uneasily at the little group in the lobby. "Do come in both of you, and I will explain matters. Binney is in such a fuss that she is making the worst of things. Alix spoke rather nervously, for her father wore his old displeased expression.

"What folly is this, Alix?" he asked a little sternly.

"Indeed, father, I did not mean to be naughty," she returned, looking at him beseechingly, "but I am afraid now that it was wrong of me to do it. But when Binney shut me up to sleep, I felt so restless. It was such a lovely afternoon, and I did so long to be out in the sunshine; and I thought if you had been here you would have taken me."

"I should have done nothing of the kind;" and Alix winced at his tone.

"But all the same I persuaded myself that you would certainly have done so; and then I thought what fun it would be to play a trick on Binney, and take a little

stroll up and down. I did not mean to go far—oh no, I quite intended to be prudent. Yes, I see it was wrong now, but the temptation was too strong."

Mr. Ashton was silent. Alix was always her own worst enemy—her fatal weakness easily led her into danger.

"It was deliciously warm, and I did so enjoy my little prowl," went on Alix; "but I suppose I went farther than I intended. A little girl had lost her *bonne*, and I stayed quite a long time comforting her. Then the wind changed, and grew colder; and I was afraid it was getting late, so I hurried, and that made me cough, and Binney scolded me so. Indeed, father dear, I am afraid it was childish of me, and I wish now that I had been more careful."

"I wish so too with all my heart," returned Mr. Ashton drily. "Alix, if you have taken cold, you have only yourself to blame. You know as well as I do that Dr. Lyster expressly said that you were not to be out after one." For Alix's self-will and culpable carelessness sorely tried him. And then without saying any more he left the room.

Alix's eyes filled with tears. "Oh, Ranee, I wish I had not been so foolish. Father looks so put out and unhappy; and I wanted never to grieve him again. But you don't know"—and the tears flowed fast—"what this terrible restlessness means. I suppose I ought to try and control it, but it seems to master me. I am like a caged thing, and then the house feels like a prison. Do make father understand this. I did not really mean to be self-willed."

"I am quite sure of that, Ailie dear," replied Ranee, kissing her; for she saw Alix looked feverish and weary,

and her nerves overwrought. "Let us hope no harm will come of your little escapade. Now I must hurry away to prepare for dinner."

It was rather a trying evening. All Alix's efforts to appear as usual could not blind them to the fact that she was extremely fatigued and felt far from well. Mr. Ashton, who had had about as much as he could bear that day, and was besides suffering from a strained shoulder, went off to Dr. Lyster for a remedy, and then retired to his own room. He only came into the sitting-room for a moment to bid Ranee good-night. "You are looking very tired," he said to her, "and I would advise you to rest. I think we both need it." And then he wished her pleasant dreams.

Ranee did not find it easy to keep her promise to him that night. With all her efforts she could not banish the remembrance of those awful moments. When she closed her eyes, the rush of the waterfall was in her ears, and the sharp sound of splitting wood as the hand-rail gave way. And then came the sudden terrified sense of losing her balance. Surely it was a miracle that had saved her. Her foothold had gone, and she was lurching sideways over a sort of chasm—for the châlet stood high above the rocky garden. If he had failed to grasp her, if he had hesitated for one second! But as the strong arm lifted her and carried her up the ladder-like steps she felt she was safe.

Ranee knew nothing about the strained shoulder, and how Mr. Ashton at that moment was relating his experience to Binney, with a solemn injunction to secrecy, while she applied the doctor's remedy. It was a week or two before he recovered from the effects of that afternoon.

"They might both have been killed!" that was the predominant thought that haunted Ranee, and which she vainly tried to banish. He might have tried to save her and failed, and then have lost his balance—— But no, she dare not pursue this thought further.

The next moment she felt herself leaning against him, dazed and terrified with the shock. Would she ever forget the tone of his voice and the strange whiteness of his face; and yet how tenderly he had tried to soothe her. "Hush, dear, you are safe now—you are safe with me, my little Ranee!" No one had ever spoken to her in such a tone. Could it be possible—— Oh no—no! she was mad to think of such a thing. And here Ranee hid her burning face in the pillow; but her feet and hands were like ice.

It was hours before she could compose herself; and then she slept so heavily that when Binney brought her her morning cup of tea she had some trouble in waking her. But she roused up at once when she heard that Alix was ill and the doctor sent for.

"I have been up in her room half the night," continued Binney sorrowfully; "her cough would not let me rest. She has taken cold, Miss Ranee, as I knew she would. But I could not disturb Master, for I knew the pain of his strain would have given him a bad night; so I only went to him just now, and he said Adolphe had better go for Dr. Lyster at once."

"What strain? What are you talking about, Binney? Do you mean Mr. Ashton has hurt himself?"

"There now, what an old fool I am!" returned Binney in a vexed tone; "and Master charged me to say nothing about it. Don't you be getting me into trouble, Miss Ranee my dear, for I have more than I can manage

already. It is only a little twist the master gave himself lifting you up those steps. And you might have been killed, my dear, and so might he, and it just turned me me cold to hear it. But I rubbed in the liniment, and he will be better soon; and he won't like you to notice it. But there, you must not keep me, for Miss Alix will be needing me, and I will tell you more when the doctor comes."

Ranee dressed herself hurriedly, and was ready to go downstairs before Binney came to her again. But she had nothing comforting to tell her. The doctor had looked grave, and talked of sending in a nurse. Alix was breathing badly, and was in a high fever; she was also suffering from a pain in her side. "It is pneumonia, that's what the doctor calls it, Miss Ranee," explained Binney in a low tone, "and the poor Master looks as though he had heard her death-warrant. There, it won't bear talking about. He has gone down to his breakfast, and you had better go too." But Ranee refused to do this until she had seen Alix.

Her heart sank as she entered the room. Alix lay propped up on pillows, looking flushed; and her breathing was much oppressed. She was evidently very ill, and was quite aware of the fact.

"Father is right," she whispered, "and I have only myself to thank—my last fatal mistake;" but she spoke with difficulty.

"We must all nurse you well, darling," observed Ranee, affecting a cheerfulness she did not feel. And then she went down to the sitting-room.

Coffee and rolls were always served in Alix's sitting-room, only the déjeuner à la fourchette and late dinner being taken in Madame Berthier's salle à manger. Here,

too, they always had afternoon tea. Mr. Ashton was waiting for her. His greeting was grave, but kind.

"You have not slept well," he remarked; "I can see that. Neither have I."

"I am afraid——" and then Ranee checked her impulsive speech; she must not get Binney into trouble. But how pale he looked; and what dark lines under his eyes! "Oh, I must speak," throwing prudence to the winds; "Binney did not mean to let it out, but she said you had strained your shoulder."

"Binney is a chatterbox; I ought not to have trusted her," he returned impatiently. "It is nothing much—only a bit of a wrench; it pained me last night, but it is better now. Only for a day or two Adolphe will have to valet me." And then he dismissed the subject rather abruptly, and asked Ranee if she had seen Alix that morning.

Ranee confessed that she had, and then added sadly that she thought her looking very ill; and though Mr. Ashton made no comment on this, he evidently shared her opinion.

"Dr. Lyster intends sending in a nurse," he observed; "he says Binney cannot manage night and day work." And then he relapsed into silence, and Ranee did not venture to disturb him.

"We are all in great trouble," Ranee wrote the next day to Vera. "Alix has taken cold and over-fatigued herself, and is seriously ill. You know, she has been more or less ailing for the last fortnight or three weeks—but I told you all about that in my last letter. Mr. Ashton had planned a little expedition for yesterday afternoon, because we thought Alix so much better that we could safely leave her; but it seems that we made a mistake, and that, in Dr. Lyster's opinion, she had been more

unwell than usual for the last two or three days. Indeed, he is not at all sure that the mischief had not already begun, though the cold had not fully developed until after her walk."

And then Ranee gave an account of Alix's imprudent escapade; but she said nothing of her own experience.

"It is double pneumonia," she finished, "and Dr. Lyster does not conceal from us that she is seriously ill."

Peter looked exceedingly grave when he read this letter; but when Vera questioned him he declined to give any definite opinion.

"There was certainly cause for anxiety," he remarked, "but the illness was not necessarily hopeless." And Dr. Weston corroborated this opinion. Indeed, he assured Vera that his experience had proved that the strong and robust succumbed more readily to the disease.

"A weakly patient will often recover," he went on; "in Alix's case, one has only to fear heart failure or collapse." But Dr. Weston sighed; he had known Alix from her babyhood, and he was extremely attached to her.

The English nurse was a great comfort to them. Binney and Ranee shared the day nursing between them. The fever ran high, and Alix suffered much from the pain in her side and the oppressed breathing. But she was very patient and gave them little trouble. Speech was difficult to her, but now and then she spoke a few words. Mr. Ashton was constant in his visits; if he failed to come, Alix seemed uneasy. Once, as he was sitting beside her and Ranee was at the other end of the room, she saw her turn feebly on her pillow and lean her cheek against his hand. "Father," she panted, "you have

always been kind to me, and I have never deserved your goodness; to the last I have disappointed you."

"I have loved you very dearly, Alix; I would have made you happy if I could."

"Yes, I know," and here she signed to him to kiss her. "Dear, dear father, if I had only been a better child to you!" And a little later, when they thought she was dropping off into an uneasy slumber, she suddenly gasped out, "Will you put those words on the tombstone—I wish it very much: 'Like as a father pitieth his children——" you know the rest?" But Ranee could not hear Mr. Ashton's answer, and a moment later he left the room.

The following afternoon Binney had quitted the room for a moment, and Alix, who was somewhat relieved by the oxygen, beckoned to Ranee to come closer. "Ranee," she whispered, "I asked father this morning to let you have all my things. There is no one else, and you have been like a sister to me. The money is his, and he does not wish to part with Flossie."

"Ailie, darling, do not try to say any more," for Alix's breath was fearfully laboured, and each word came with difficulty; but the burning clasp on her wrist detained her.

"One word more, Ranee. If it is in your power, please comfort father. I know—I have found out—that you are very dear to him." But here Binney re-entered the room, and Ranee, pale and trembling from head to foot, rose from her knees. Alix thought herself dying, and yet Dr. Lyster had not given up hope.

But that night they were all roused from their sleep. Dr. Weston's fear had been verified: there was sudden heart failure. When Ranee entered the room Alix was already unconscious, and Mr. Ashton was kneeling beside

the bed with his face hidden in his hands. Was he silently commending his dying child to the care of her Heavenly Father? Ranee gave him one glance, and then knelt down at the foot of the bed.

Binney was sobbing audibly. But Mr. Ashton checked her with silent peremptoriness, and there was something strangely impressive in his whispered, "Hush—you must not disturb my child." And then again there was silence.

Ranee never knew at what moment the spirit fled. But presently Nurse Eleanor touched her and led her to the door. Mr. Ashton did not at once follow her. Ranee sat dazed and tremulous until Binney came to her.

"She did not suffer, Miss Ranee," exclaimed poor Binney, wiping away the tears that were blinding her. "The dear Lord knew she was young and feeble, and that she was afraid of death, and she was through the dark valley before she knew she had come to it. 'He shall gather the lambs with His arm, and carry them in His bosom,' Miss Ranee, my dear."

Yes, it was true. The short unhappy life was over; the weak, restless, loving nature was at last at peace. Never more would Alix grieve or wound her father's heart.

Vera cried bitterly as she read the announcement in the *Times* that Peter silently handed her one morning:—

On 2nd February, at the Pension Berthier, Cannes, ALEXANDRINE MAUD, the widow of the late Captain LUGARD, and only child of ROGER ASHTON, ESQ., of the Garth, Marshlands, in the one-and-twentieth year of her age.

Later in the year strangers who visited the new cemetery at Cannes were always attracted by a tomb standing somewhat apart from the others on rising ground, with

a background of trees and flowering shrubs. The beautiful figure of an angel was standing under a stone cross, and one hand seemed solemnly pointing to the words engraved there under Alix's name:

Like a father pitieth his children, so the Lord pitieth them that fear Him.

Chapter XLI

LAST DAYS AT THE PENSION BERTHIER

If our hearts do but keep fresh, we may still love those who are gone, and may still find happiness in loving them.—JULIUS C. HARE.

Out of suffering have emerged the strongest souls; the most massive characters are seamed with scars.—CHOPIN.

RANEE could never quite recollect how that long sad week passed after Alix's death. She was always occupied—every hour seemed to bring her some fresh duty—and yet each day seemed endless.

She had many letters to write, both for herself and Mr. Ashton, and Binney was continually needing her help. The faithful creature was almost worn out with fatigue and sorrow, and but for Ranee's affectionate care would have utterly broken down. Ranee was very good to her, and never left her long alone.

Every one at the pension was kind and considerate; but, with the exception of Pauline de la Motte, Ranee shrank from all companionship. She preferred sitting alone in Alix's little sitting-room, or in the shaded alcove in the balcony, and Mr. Ashton would often join her. Sometimes he would bring her letters to answer for him, or discuss some matter of business with her. Ranee loved to render him these little services. She liked to feel that he turned to her naturally for help and sympathy, and

that in some way she was necessary to him. And in spite of her very real sorrow for the loss of her friend, she was conscious at times of some strange secret gladness for which she could find no reason, and which was too sacred to bear the light.

On the afternoon after Alix's death she drove with Mr. Ashton at his own request to the new cemetery to select the site for the grave, and later in the week he asked her to look over the sketches for the monument he wished to erect to her memory. He was very calm and self-contained in his grief, but looked ill and worn, and more than once he owned that he slept badly. But he shrank from any expression of sympathy. Even on the day of the funeral his impenetrable reserve was so baffling that Mr. Moore, who had come over from Nice to show his sympathy, could only wring his hand silently. But to Ranee he said later, "Ashton looks as though he had had an illness. You had better get him away from here as soon as possible."

Ranee quite agreed with Mr. Moore; but she knew that it was quite impossible for them to leave at once. Indeed, it was more than a fortnight before they were free to turn their faces homeward.

One evening, as Ranee was sitting by the window looking out on the moonlight, Mr. Ashton entered the room and sat down opposite her. But for some time he was silent. Once or twice Ranee looked at him, but he seemed absorbed in thought, and she did not like to disturb him. But presently he roused himself.

"There is something I have been wanting to tell you, Miss Holt," he began with some abruptness, "and this seems a good opportunity. Two or three days before she died my dear Alix told me that she wished you to have

all her personal effects—clothes, trinkets, and books—with the exception of a few things she desired to be given to Margaret Weston and one or two other friends. She asked me if I would mind this. 'Ranee has been like a dear sister to me, and there is no one else, and I should love her to have them'—those were her words. I need not say that I fully approved of this. She is right, there is no one else whom either she or I would wish to have them."

'But, Mr. Ashton, it is too much—all those beautiful things!" But he put up his hand to stop her.

"It was my child's wish—that is enough for me. The jewellery that belonged to her mother remains in my possession, but she had many pretty trinkets of her own. I told her that I wished Flossie to remain at the Garth, and that pleased her." Here Mr. Ashton's voice became rather husky. "She asked me also to remember Binney and Walton and the other servants, and I told her that no one who had been kind to her should be forgotten; and this contented her."

"Dear, dear Ailie," whispered Ranee, quite overcome by this bequest. But Mr. Ashton seemed unable to discuss it any further. He walked to the window and stood there looking over the moonlit sea, as though to regain his self-control. Perhaps at that moment even his strong nature craved for sympathy, for he said presently, "If only she had known how dearly I loved her!" The words seemed wrung from him, as though he hardly knew that he had uttered them aloud.

It was impossible for Ranee to keep silence. "Oh, Mr. Ashton, she did know! She was always telling me how good you were to her."

"'Perfect love casteth out fear,'" he returned with

the same bitterness. "From a child Alix was afraid of me; and yet there was nothing I would not have done to make her happy. She was my only child—how was a man to forget that!"

"Yes, I know"—and Ranee was standing by him now. "But Alix was so timid by nature; little things frightened her—a look, a tone, a mere word would scare her; it was her temperament, she could not help it; but all the time her heart was so loving. When she was ill she could hardly bear you out of her sight. 'Where is father?—I want father'—I have heard her say that often."

He was silent, and the shadow still lay heavy on his brow. "If I had only been more patient with her—more tender!" that was what he was saying to himself. But Ranee, who read the unspoken thought, laid her hand on his arm.

"Indeed you must not grieve so. Dear Alix was always devoted to you; but she could not bear her trouble, and when the shock came she just drooped and withered. I think"—in a trembling voice—"her Heavenly Father knew that she was not fit for this world, and so He took her where she would be safe and at peace. Dear Mr. Ashton, do be comforted; Alix understands you now, as she never did before."

Mr. Ashton did not answer in words—perhaps he could not, for his very soul was stirred to its depths—but he lifted the little hand to his lips as though in mute gratitude. A minute later he said, "God bless you, my child." Then he left the room and she did not see him again that night.

A few days later they left the Pension Berthier. Mr. Ashton intended to return for a day or two later in the

year, when the monument would be completed; but Ranee never expected to see it again, and she shed many tears that last night.

Glad as she was to be returning to the Red House, the thought of all the wedding festivities and bustle oppressed her. Vera and Peter, with all their kindness and consideration, would be naturally absorbed with their own business. She would have to rejoice with them, to take interest in all their concerns, and to try and be like the old Ranee, who had been the very light of the household. And yet how was she to forget Alix lying in her foreign grave, and the childless father going to his solitary home? Would her heart ever cease to ache at this remembrance?

"In the midst of life we are in death"—would those solemn words ever cease vibrating in her ears? Oh, how complex human life was, how full of strange contrasts! On the one hand Alix, the child-widow, with her short unhappy life, a mere record of failures and mistakes, and Vera in the bloom of youth and happiness. Unbidden tears rose to Ranee's eyes as these thoughts came to her. And yet—and yet who would dare to say that Alix was not having her good things now!

Ranee was aware that Mr. Ashton intended to take leave of her at Euston; business would detain him in town for two or three days. But Binney would be with her, and Peter had signified his intention of meeting her at Abbey-Thorpe.

They had fully expected to have more than half-an-hour to wait at Euston; but traffic detained them, and they only arrived at the station about seven or eight minutes before the train started. Mr. Ashton hurried them down the platform and into the first-class compart-

ment, and then went off to see to the luggage. When he returned there was only time for a word or two.

"You will take care of yourself?" he said, looking a little anxiously at the girl's face. "But you will be in good hands; your sister will look after you."

"And you?" Ranee's eyes were very wistful. She wanted to ask him to come and see them, but courage failed her. Perhaps Mr. Ashton read her unspoken thought, for he half-smiled.

"You must not worry about me," he said kindly. "I shall be very busy. I am afraid from what I hear that things have gone a little wrong at the farm in my absence. There," as the bell rang, "you will be off in half a minute. Good-bye; I trust we shall meet soon." He lifted his hat and stepped back as the train moved; but the sad yearning in his eyes haunted Ranee all the rest of the journey.

"I am glad now that I did not ask him to come," she said to herself. "I am sure he knows how I shall miss him, and it will be far better to leave it to him." "Oh, I hope—I hope he will come soon." But here Binney claimed her attention; she was very low at the idea of parting with Ranee, and the girl had some trouble in comforting her.

Peter was waiting for them at the platform, and nothing could be kinder than his welcome. "The Garth carriage is waiting to take you to the Red House, Ranee," he said; "Mr. Ashton telegraphed this morning. Mrs. Binney will go with us as far as that." Ranee flushed a little; she was touched at this thoughtfulness for her comfort. Peter looked at her a little sorrowfully. Surely she was rather thin and worn, and her eyes looked twice their usual size. "Poor little girl," he said as they drove

off, "all this has been very rough on you; but we will soon cheer you up amongst us." But a squeeze of his arm was her only answer. There was a lump in her throat that would not let her speak. Dear Peter, how kind he was, and how good it was to see him! She had never loved him so well, and yet she could find nothing to say to him. Perhaps Peter understood how it was, for he left her quiet and talked in a low voice to Binney.

Vera and Sallie were on the threshold to greet her, and when Ranee saw Vera's dear, beautiful face, and felt her loving arms round her, the painful tension of her nerves seemed to relax and she felt more like her old self.

"Dear Vera, how I have wanted you!"

"Not more than I have wanted you, darling," returned her sister affectionately. "Sit down on that couch, Ray, and Sallie will help you to take off your hat and jacket while I pour out the tea. No, don't talk to her, Peter," as he showed an inclination to share the couch in his usual sociable way. "Ray is dreadfully tired. I mean to take her up to her room directly. There is a nice fire there, and she must lie down and have a nap."

"Right you are, my lady," returned Peter maliciously. He had lately addressed his sister in this way—"to get her used to her future title," as he would observe, but in reality for the pleasure of seeing her blush and dimple. But this time she frowned and shook her head at him.

"Don't be tiresome, Peter dear; and please give Ranee another hot scone." But Ranee had no desire to eat. She sat watching them all in a sort of dreamy content. Surely Peter had grown handsome, and how

much broader he was; and Sallie was ever so much prettier; and as for Vera, she had grown too lovely for words. A new dignity had come to her, and yet she was the same simple-hearted Vera. Ranee knew that Sir Heber had insisted on Bear's returning to Godstone until after the wedding, and that Damaris had offered no objection to this, so Ranee would have her old room, though Sallie preferred the attic, until she could take possession of Vera's little room, and this was a great relief to her.

The old room looked very cosy and comfortable with its bright fire; and as Ranee lay down, and Vera covered her up warmly and sat down beside her, a soothing, peaceful feeling seemed to steal over her tired frame.

Vera would not let her talk much, and soon made an excuse to leave her. "She will drop off to sleep in the twilight," she said to Peter when she went downstairs. "She wanted to tell me things, but I thought it would be better to let her rest first." And Peter told her that she was a sensible young woman.

"She will look more like herself after a good night's sleep," he observed; "these last three weeks have taken it out of her. I confess it was a bit of a shock when I saw her at the station; she looked so seedy and out of sorts." And then Peter went off to pay a surprise visit to Wayside and tell Hannah about Ranee's arrival.

Ranee found a great comfort in talking to Vera. She even told her about the accident at the châlet, though she half repented her confidence, Vera was so upset. "But he saved your life, darling!" she exclaimed, as she dried her eyes; "I shall always be grateful to him for that."

"Yes, he saved my life," returned Ranee almost

solemnly; and then Vera looked at her a little strangely, but she did not speak. Did she at this moment have a faint glimmering of the truth? Was there any occult reason beside poor Alix's death for Ranee's altered looks and unusual gravity? If Vera asked herself these questions, she certainly questioned no one else. Love had taught her many things. Ranee need not fear that Vera would seek to pry into anything so sacred; it was this sweet reserve and tenderness that made Vera so safe a confidante.

But there was one thing that Ranee did not tell her. Nothing on earth would have induced her to repeat Alix's last words to her. But as she lay awake at night, she would say them over and over to herself, and always with a sense of surprise and awe: "Ranee, if it is in your power, please comfort father. I know—I have found out—that you are very dear to him." Could this be true? And yet deep down in her inner consciousness Ranee knew it was true.

Vera had been much touched when she heard of Alix's bequest. "I think it was sweet of her to think of it," she said. But when the boxes arrived at the Red House, she could hardly induce the girl to look at them. Vera coaxed and remonstrated, and finally the sisters unpacked them, and the things were then carefully arranged in an unused wardrobe in the attic. Binney had done her work well, and had carried out her master's orders. Only the freshest and prettiest of Alix's frocks had been sent; but Vera secretly rejoiced over the dainty underlinen and beautiful furs, and the fitted travelling-bag that her father had given her on her last birthday.

The books were not unpacked—there was no room for them at present—and the case of jewellery had only a

cursory inspection. Ranee seemed almost afraid to glance at it.

"Yes, I know," she said hurriedly; "Alix had beautiful things, and she told me once that her father meant her to have her mother's jewellery on her one-and-twentieth birthday, but they were too handsome for a girl of her age." Then, as she closed the case, she said anxiously, "Do you think I shall have to keep all these things for my own use, Vera? Poor Sallie has nothing, and there is that little necklet and cross." But Vera shook her head.

"I don't think you ought to part with anything, Ray; I am sure Mr. Ashton would not like it." And then, blushing a little, "You know Heber is going to give you and Sallie such lovely lockets, and she can have my little gold chain to wear with hers. I can never use it again."

"Very well," returned Ranee, but she was not quite convinced. Later on, when she found a favourable opportunity, she would ask Mr. Ashton what he wished. "I am sure dear Alix would like Sallie to have something," she said to herself as she followed Vera downstairs.

Chapter XLII

AN OPEN SECRET

Now I can face the world with my new life,
With my new crown.
How soon a smile of God can change the world!
How we are made for happiness—how work
Grows play, adversity a winning fight!

BROWNING.

AFTER a few days Ranee recovered herself. There was something soothing in the home atmosphere—cheerfulness is infectious; and Peter's voice, "chortling for joy," as Sallie quaintly observed, and singing scrappy bits of well-known ditties in his dingy study, was like music in Ranee's ears. He and Vera were so deeply, intensely happy. How was Ranee to refrain from rejoicing with them? How could she selfishly absorb herself in her own thoughts?

There was plenty of work, but no bustle; Vera was too good a manager for that. Besides, her modest trousseau was almost completed, and only needed finishing touches. Ranee was too thankful to help: occupation was good for her, and she liked to talk to Vera as they sat over their work. On the afternoon after her arrival at the Red House Peter had carried her off to Wayside to see the newly-furnished rooms and all the improvements. Ranee admired and praised to his heart's content, but her speech to him as they went out into the February darkness pleased him most.

"Peter, it is a lovely house—everything is charming and in good taste; and I am quite sure that you and Hannah will be very happy." Then she added, a little shyly, "Hannah was very sweet to me, but I never realised before that she was so nice-looking. Sir Heber spoke truth—she is quite handsome."

Peter could have hugged her on the spot. Ranee was right, she and Vera would never be ashamed of their sister-in-law. Hannah's simplicity and good sense, her fine nature, invested her with a new dignity. She was a grand-looking woman now, and the years would only mature and mellow her. Every day Peter realised more deeply that he had won a treasure. "She is as good as gold, and I don't deserve her," was all he said in answer to Ranee's speech; and then he went on to tell her that Dr. Weston had already mooted the subject of the partnership, and that in a few months it would be a *fait accompli.*

About a fortnight after Ranee's return home, Mr. Ashton rode over to the Red House, but he did not stay long, and as Vera and Peter were in the room, Ranee had no opportunity of speaking to him alone. He looked much as usual, though rather tired and worn. He talked most to Peter. Things had gone very wrong during his absence, he told him, and he would be obliged to get rid of his bailiff. He had been very much worried, and his work was cut out for him for months to come. "I think I have secured the right man," he went on—"Maxwell recommended him—but he will not be free to come to me until Michaelmas, so until then I must be my own bailiff."

"That is rather rough on you," returned Peter sympathetically. But Mr. Ashton shook his head.

"No, the work will be good for me." And then he rose to take leave; his visit had hardly lasted half-an-hour. As he took Ranee's hand, he said in a low voice, "You are looking better—I am glad to see that. I knew your sister would take good care of you. Oh, by the bye, Binney asked me to give her duty."

"Will you tell her to come and see me?" returned Ranee, flushing under his grave, intent look; "I want to thank her for all she has done; the things were so beautifully packed. And thank you too." But he pressed her hand kindly and turned away, it was evident that he wished no more to be said.

"Poor Mr. Ashton," observed Vera, "I am afraid he feels Alix's death dreadfully." But she spoke to empty walls; Ranee had quitted the room abruptly, and Vera never finished her sentence.

It had been a tantalising visit to Ranee, and yet how glad she had been to see him: the mere consciousness that he was in the room gave her pleasure. True, she had not said half-a-dozen words to him, but she could listen to his voice and hear all he had been doing. "Yes, he was right, the work would be good for him; anything was better than sitting alone brooding in his solitary house." And when Binney came she endorsed this.

"That is what we all say, Miss Ranee," observed Binney; "it is a sight better for the master to be riding about, tiring himself, than moping in his study and workshop; he is more ready for his meals and sleeps better. But he found time to question me about the things I was packing, and I found it difficult to satisfy him. Nothing but the best must be sent to the Red House; I was quite fagged and tired before those trunks were finished." But Ranee made no remark on this.

March passed, and then came April and Vera's wedding-day. To Ranee it seemed like a dream. She saw a lovely bride, who was at one time as white as a lily and who afterwards glowed like a rose, and whose sweet looks excited universal admiration. Ranee overheard an old family friend of Sir Heber's discussing Vera's appearance with the best man.

"Lady Maxwell has a beautiful face," he said; "from the little I have seen, I fancy her disposition matches it, and in that case Heber is a lucky man." Lady Maxwell, yes, of course they meant Vera—her darling was Lady Maxwell now.

As the honeymoon would be only a short one, the newly-married pair had decided to spend it in Devonshire. Later on Sir Heber intended to take his wife abroad and show her the beauties of Switzerland and the Italian lakes.

"We shall not be quite three weeks away," Vera had said to Ranee as she wished her good-bye; and before Ranee could realise what was happening Peter had carried her off. "Your husband is waiting, my dear, and there is no time to lose;" and then there was a shower of rice and they were gone.

How empty and desolate the house felt the next day! But happily there was much to do. Vera had begged Sallie to go over to Godstone for an hour or two each day to cheer up Bear in their absence, and this left more for Ranee to do; she had to take up the reins of housekeeping and to inaugurate various changes in the household. Sallie intended moving into Vera's room—she had always had a fancy for it—and when Peter left his room would be available for a visitor.

Two days after the wedding Peter found Ranee alone

in the twilight waiting for Judith to bring in tea, and at once seized the opportunity of stating what he termed his last wishes; but first he took the grave little face between his hands and kissed it.

"Cheer up, little 'un," he said in his fresh, boyish voice, "and just listen to me a moment.

"Things are about as jolly as they can be. Here you are—you and Sallie—and I shall be just round the corner—at least it is ten minutes good walking from door to door; and there's Vera—her ladyship's self—not more than a mile away."

'But, Peter——" But though Ranee struggled for speech, Peter refused to let her utter a word.

"Age first, if you please;" and then Peter had his say.

He and Vera had talked over things, and they both wished their sisters to remain at the Red House for a year at least. After that other arrangements might possibly be made; there would be time enough to talk of that. "We both wish it," finished Peter emphatically.

"Of course I should like it," returned Ranee wistfully; "but there is Sallie's art education." But it appeared that this also had been fully considered by the brother and sister.

"We think Sallie is young enough to wait; besides, there is Mr. Henderson—you are forgetting him, Ray." For a few months previously St. Vedast's Lodge—a beautiful old house standing in its own grounds hardly a quarter of a mile from Godstone—had been taken by the well-known artist Alexander Henderson, whose pictures were so much admired. He had lately inherited a good deal of money, and as his health was bad he now only painted for his own amusement. The Hendersons were very pleasant people, and showed a disposition to be

friendly, and Mr. Henderson had taken a great fancy to the quiet, demure little Sallie, and she often sat beside him as he painted.

Vera had often spoken to the old artist about Sallie's desire to improve herself. "Let the child come here," he had said good-naturedly; "she won't be in my way, and I can give her some hints." And already it was an understood thing that Sallie should steal into the studio at St. Vedast's Lodge, where a corner had been fitted up for her, three or four days a week, and already she was benefiting from this informal art education.

Ranee assured Peter that she would be glad to stay at the Red House—and she spoke the truth, banishment from Abbey-Thorpe and her dear ones would have been painful to her—and so it was settled.

And then came Peter's wedding—a very quiet affair, in accordance with Hannah's wish. Hannah had refused to wear bridal attire, but the pearl-grey satin and little close bonnet exactly suited her, and people said they had never seen a nobler-looking bride. As for Peter—but Ranee only ventured to look at him once—in spite of the gravity of the occasion, Peter was just himself! And Vera was there looking lovelier than ever, and all the little world of Abbey-Thorpe said Lady Maxwell was dressed to perfection.

"Come and spend a long day with me to-morrow, Ray," she whispered. "Heber told me to ask you and Sallie too; he knows I want to talk to you. Oh, he is so good to me! But there, I must not say more now," and Vera turned away.

"She is very happy," Ranee said to herself; "Heber is the right man for her. And my dear Peter is happy too." But Ranee sighed involuntarily as she went in

search of Sallie. She did not grudge them their good things—on the contrary, she was full of gratitude and thankfulness—but all the same she was conscious of vague sadness and restlessness. How beautiful the orchard walks would be at the Garth now! There were times when she longed with a strange longing to find herself sitting under the "Seven Sisters" again.

* * * * * * * *

The spring merged into summer, and summer into autumn, and Ranee suddenly woke to the fact that it was October, and that this time last year she had been at the Pension Berthier. The weather was unusually mild, the October days were golden with sunshine, and the air soft and mellow as old wine. No frost had yet touched the oaks in the avenue at Godstone Park, and the yellow leaves that pelted her so noiselessly floated hither and thither between the tree boles like gigantic shrivelled butterflies. Ranee had promised to spend the afternoon at Godstone; Sallie was, as usual, at St. Vedast's Lodge, and would join her later. The girls were very seldom at the Red House. Ranee spent most of her time at Wayside or at the Park; but Peter often pretended to grumble, and declared that Vera had the lion's share. And indeed the sisters were inseparable. "And I have two brothers now," Ranee would proudly observe, for Sir Heber was exceedingly good to her.

All these months Ranee had seen very little of Mr. Ashton. He had never repeated his visit to the Red House, but now and then she met him at Godstone; and once, when she was spending the afternoon at Wayside, he rode over to speak to Peter on business, and was induced to come into the drawing-room for a cup of tea. Ranee

thought he looked better and less depressed; but there was no opportunity for any conversation.

Occasionally she came across him in the town, either riding or walking, and if he were alone he would stop and speak to her with his old friendliness; but he never spoke of himself. He would question her kindly about her occupations and amusements, and seemed glad when she told him that most of her time was spent at Godstone.

This afternoon she was earlier than usual, and was not at all surprised to hear from Collins that Vera had not returned from her drive.

"Sir Heber and Miss Bernardine are with her, ma'am," he remarked. "Her ladyship thought they might possibly be a little late for tea."

Her ladyship! Ranee's lip curled with amusement; all these months she had hardly got used to Vera's new honours. But Vera fitted into her position with the utmost simplicity. "I do like my new name," she said once naïvely to Ranee; "Heber says I have quite left off blushing when the servants call me 'my lady.' It is funny how soon one gets used to things."

Ranee was not sorry to be alone a little—there was a book she wanted to finish. So she threw off her hat and ensconced herself in a sunny corner of the big drawing-room; but she had hardly settled herself before the door-bell rang, and to her chagrin she heard Collins ushering in a visitor. She was too far off to hear the name, and she was so securely hidden by a palm and the Japanese screen that the new-comer did not perceive her; and as Ranee came forward she saw to her surprise and pleasure that it was Mr. Ashton. He was standing by a little table, and, thinking himself alone in

the room, he had taken up a framed photograph of Ranee that Vera had recently placed there. He had evidently not seen it before, for he was examining it with great earnestness.

As Ranee stepped from behind the screen he put the photo down, and there was a flash of pleasure in his eyes.

"You here?" he said, coming quickly towards her; "I thought Collins said Miss Sallie. He asked me to wait, and I am glad I did." And then he looked at her, and continued a little abruptly, "I was thinking of calling at the Red House soon; I wanted to talk to you about something, but one never finds you alone."

"No, I am not often alone," she returned rather shyly. "Sallie and I are very seldom home; she is always with the Hendersons, and I am so much with Vera."

"Yes, I know." And then for a moment there was silence.

Ranee felt a little nervous. Was it her fancy or did Mr. Ashton seem somewhat embarrassed? "Did you want to speak about anything particular?" she stammered; but the next moment she would have gladly recalled her question.

"Yes," he said with the same curious abruptness; "I wanted to tell you that I could bear my loneliness no longer. Ranee, my child, will you have pity on me? Indeed I need you—I have needed you all this time."

"I do not understand," she faltered; but for once in her life Ranee was not telling the truth. How could she mistake the meaning of those grave, loving eyes? Her heart was beating so fast that she felt almost suffocated. And what were those words that were ringing

in her ears?—"Ranee, if it is ever in your power, please comfort father." And now he was telling her that he needed her—that he could bear his loneliness no longer. But the next moment he was drawing her towards him.

"My darling, I see you understand, only my abruptness has startled you. Ranee, I have loved you very dearly for a long time, and I think you have grown to care for me a little. Will you be my wife, dearest? I know I could make you happy." But Ranee's answer was hardy audible except to her lover's ear.

And so this wonderful thing had come to pass: the man whom she had secretly worshipped, and who had saved her life, loved her so well that he had asked her to be his wife. She Roger Ashton's wife! No marvel that Ranee trembled and hid her face. But as soon as she could speak she repeated Alix's words.

"Dear Alix asked me to comfort you if it should ever be in my power," she whispered. And then lifting her eyes shyly, "Do you think she meant this?" Then Mr. Ashton's face grew grave for a moment.

"I cannot help thinking so," he said quietly; "the dear child implied as much to me. 'I hope Ranee will comfort you,' she said that last day; 'she is so sweet and good, and I love her so.' But she could say no more. I think Alix understood how it was with me, and she hoped that you would take her place as mistress of the Garth."

Ranee flushed and her lip quivered for a moment, as though tears were not very far off. "It seems almost too wonderful to be true," she sighed. But Mr. Ashton smiled as he kissed her.

"You will find it true, I hope, when the spring comes," he said quietly. "Ranee, I am so glad you love it as

you do—'The haunt of ancient peace.' And do you remember, sweetheart, those talks underneath the 'Seven Sisters'?" Need he have asked the question? How those golden hours had lingered in her memory!

Fate was kind that afternoon, and more than an hour passed before they heard wheels on the drive. Mr. Ashton went out into the hall to meet them. Perhaps—who knows?—some word passed between him and Vera, for as she came into the room her pretty eyes were full of tears.

"Oh, Ray—my own darling Ray!" But Ranee could only cling to her in silence.

"You are glad?" she whispered presently.

"Glad! I have never been more pleased with anything in my life; and Heber will be overjoyed too. But, Ray—you must not mind my saying it now—we have always expected it. The last time you were here together Heber said to me afterwards, "Ashton is just wrapped up in the girl—he never loses a word or a look—but he thinks it too soon to speak; he will take his own time for that.'"

"Oh, hush, they are coming in, Vera." And Ranee started away like a frightened fawn. But she coloured beautifully as Mr. Ashton came up to her.

"I think we had better tell them about it, dear," he said in a low voice. "But I rather suspect it is an open secret with Maxwell!"

THE END

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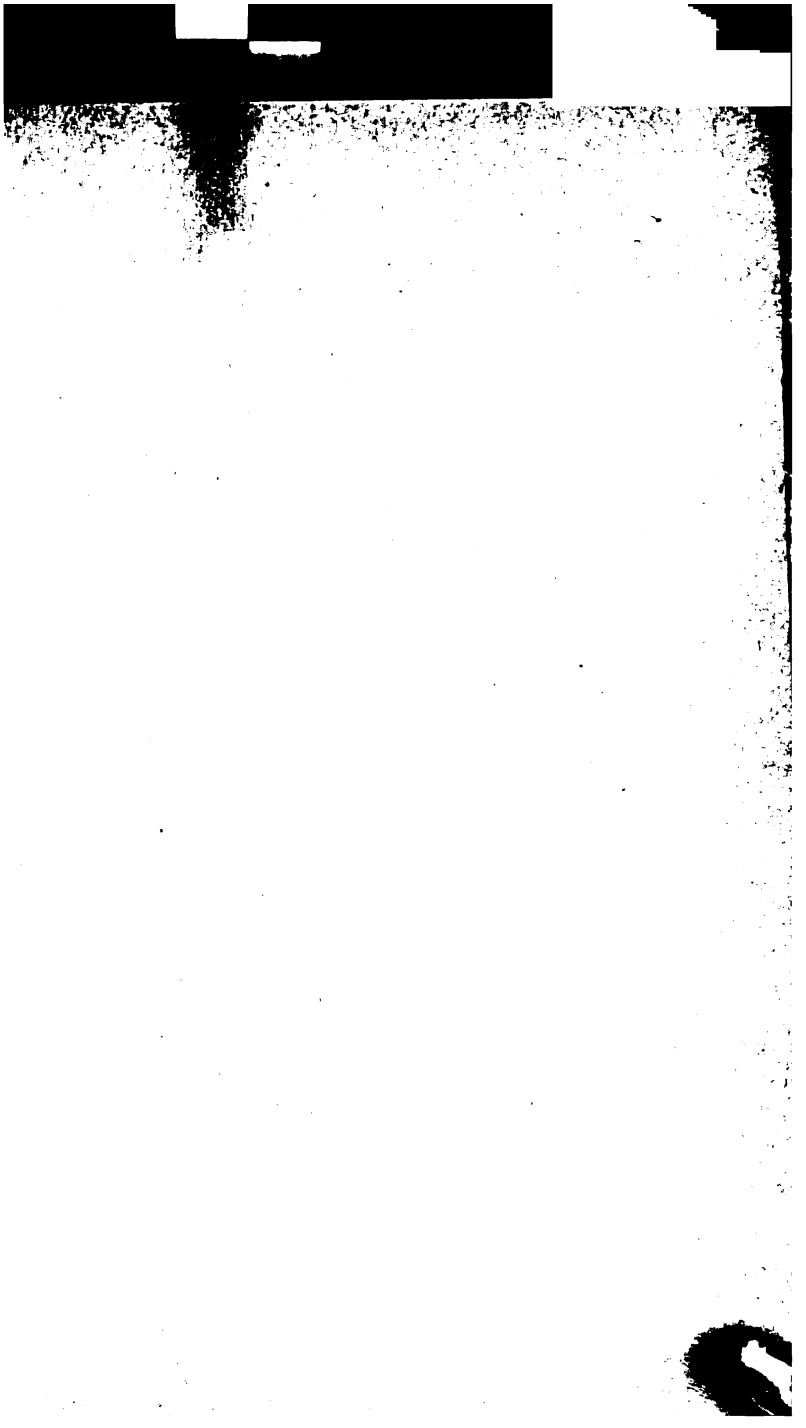
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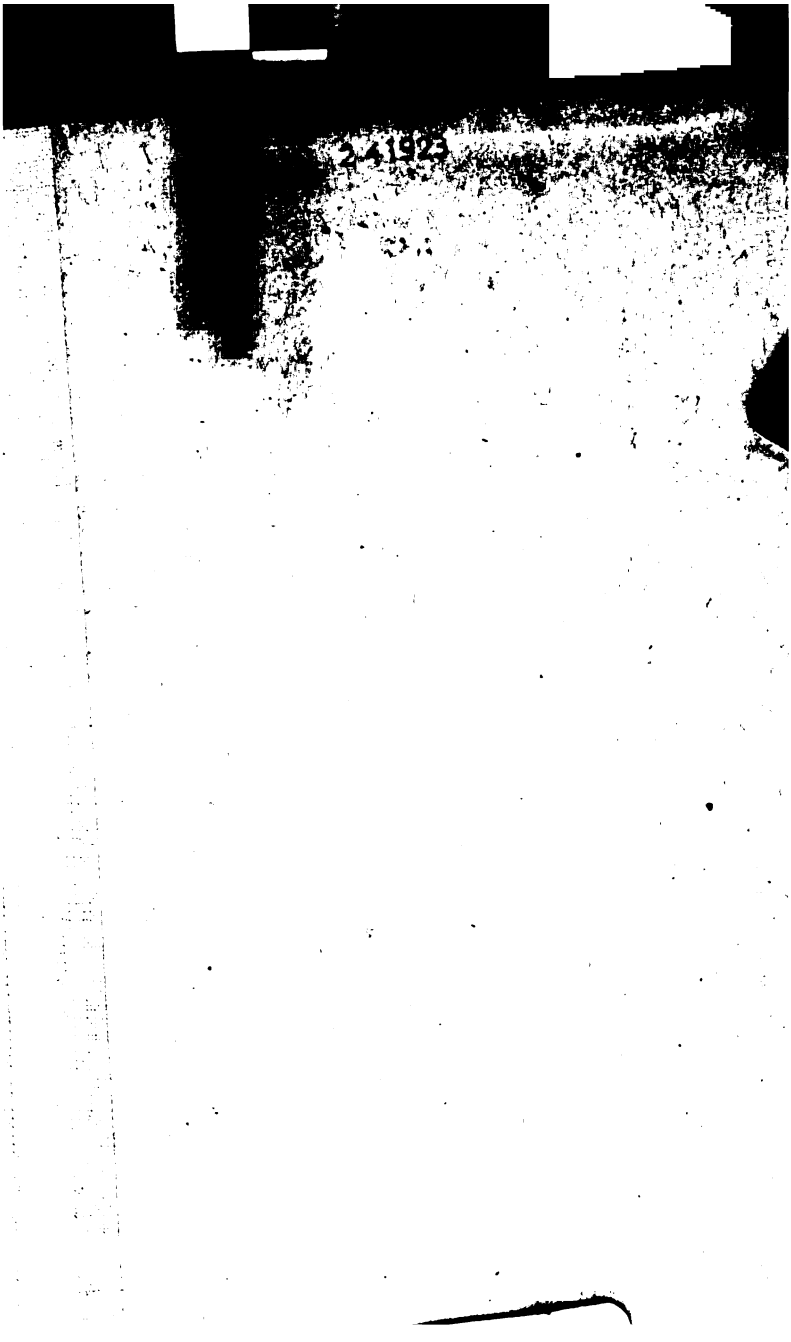
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